

Theory of America's Founding, (Part 2): Consent, Revolution, God and Honor

Contributed by Wes Riddle
Tue, May 22, 2012, 09:17 AM

Besides Equality and Natural Rights (discussed last week), the ideas or principles that comprise the American theory of government, i.e., the proper conceptual building blocks for righteous government are Consent, Revolution, God and Honor. Consent is needed to form legitimate government. The Declaration of Independence says that to secure the rights of life, liberty and pursuit of happiness, "Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed." Indeed, people must join to form governments to secure all their natural rights, but governments do not derive unlimited powers to perform that function! Just powers are only those consented to by the people. The Founders believed that a republic was that form of government that best reflected consent, in that, all powers are derived directly or indirectly from the great body of the people" (The Federalist 39). I have observed, however, that consent may be measured differently from culture to culture--and not always democratically. Some people in the world don't even value their vote. All I can say is that we Americans possess a political culture and explicit heritage that measures consent exclusively through democratic republican means. Notwithstanding, consent in and of itself is not the sole standard of legitimacy or goodness. The people do not have the right to consent to unjust powers. According to Thomas G. West and Douglas A. Jeffrey, the Founders would tell us we cannot rightly consent to powers of government that violate the unalienable rights of individuals. Consider then that the people are not supreme to the standard of Right per se. The standard of Right would be God's province. Democratic majorities may not redefine what is right. The inalienable rights are set for all time by Nature and Nature's God, and they are written and fixed in our founding documents. The Founders would not recognize any such thing as a "living" Constitution. They would impeach half our judges today for suggesting it.

Hence the real challenge of self-government: people must be of such character that they will only give their consent to good and just measures. And this extends to establishing government and to operating it. The Founders essentially took care of establishing a just government with the people of the first generation. They made a "social compact" with fellow citizens, and I would argue that they covenanted not only with each other but with God as their Witness and Gaurantor. But that still leaves the ongoing matter of consent in the operation of government. That's something you should be doing on a regular basis, at least by casting your informed ballot on election day. But no matter what ballot initiative you consent to, you always retain the unalienable right to liberty and may never delegate to the government permanently. In a sense, the government rests on a renewable source of consent, which you give it through participation, acquiescence or peaceful protest. The right to Revolution naturally follows. West and Jeffrey again: "Government exists to protect natural rights, and government derives its just powers from consent. If it is not doing this, the people should get rid of it and set up a new one. [Indeed], the right to revolution is reflected in the early American conviction that the people have a right to keep and bear arms and to govern themselves in all local matters through local governments close to the people." Of course, the right to revolution doesn't mean it is right or good to overthrow government at the drop of a hat. If government is doing a tolerably good and decent job, you put up with its shortcomings and mistakes. If the system remains open to a redress of grievances, you continue to participate. The Declaration says, "Prudence . . . will dictate that governments . . . should not be changed for light and transient causes." Prudence is what we might also call "horse sense." Revolution is dangerous--it throws men back into the state of nature, where destructive passions and violence may become uncontrolled. For that reason secession is probably the preferential form of revolution, should revolution ever be justified in America.

Additionally, the Founders placed God and Honor ahead of narrow self-interest when they established the government. They commended us to do the same in its ongoing operation. The Declaration says that when a people are subjected to a long train of abuses aiming at absolute despotism, it isn't only their right-- "it is their duty," to change the government. The duty is higher than one's own personal survival or selfish interest. The Founders' sense of honor taught them that they must be ready to sacrifice their lives and property for the sake of their duty. In order to establish and preserve free government, they pledged their lives, fortunes, and "sacred honor." In the Declaration of the Causes and Necessity of Their Taking up Arms (1775), Thomas Jefferson and John Dickinson wrote: "We have counted the cost of this contest, and find nothing so dreadful as voluntary slavery. Honor, justice, and humanity, forbid us tamely to surrender that freedom which we have received from our gallant ancestors. . . ." It was a notion behind much Southern chivalry before and during the War Between the States, i.e., the Founders' conviction that political slavery and dishonor are worse even than death. As honor is a keen sense of right and wrong, it implies integrity and an adherence to right action or principles above else. In this view, people are legitimately supreme to government when it comes to upholding standards of Right. For standards of Right on earth become a nexus ultimately, where God and the individual meet in man's conscience. Government may not arrogate to itself the legitimate power to speak for any individual at this level of communion or duty. There is no collective conscience and no collective Soul. One person at a time may redefine what is right, if and when government gets it terribly wrong. The inalienable rights are set for all time by Nature and Nature's God. We end then where we started, with the Creator. Indeed, there are four distinct references to God in the Declaration of Independence. To the Founders, separation of church and state was meant to prevent a single religious sect from becoming official religion for the whole country. But the principles of this nation in fact constitute religious doctrine, the Declaration's own

theology--with God as author of Law and Source of rights for mankind, eternal and unalienable on earth as it is in Heaven.

Wesley Allen Riddle is a retired military officer with degrees and honors from West Point and Oxford. Widely published in the academic and opinion press, he serves as State Director of the Republican freedom Coalition (RFC) and is currently running for U. S. Congress (TX-District 25 in the Republican Primary. He is also author of two books, Horse Sense for the New Millennium (2011), and The Nexus of Faith and Freedom (2012). Both books are available on-line at <http://www.wesriddle.net/> and from fine bookstores everywhere. Email: Wes@WesRiddle.com.