

The Challenge Before Us

By Jim Jess

On September 17, 2017, we celebrated the 230th anniversary of the signing of the United States Constitution. It is the oldest national written constitution still in use. It has served us well for 230 years, even though many of its provisions have been abandoned by our public officials.

The challenge before us today is to restore our Constitution in the vision of our Founding Fathers. That means we must take up the challenge of understanding it ourselves well enough to educate others about it.

The Constitution will not be restored until we fully educate individuals in the basic principles of liberty and impart to them the great principle that with liberty comes responsibility—the responsibility to be good and virtuous citizens.

What does that mean? It means we care enough about our nation to reach out to our neighbor and contribute to the betterment of our communities—and there are many ways to do that. But it is critical that caring, virtuous citizens engage. If we don't our republic will be lost.

One of the reasons the Roman Republic ceased to exist and became an empire with an emperor is that civic virtue died. People entrusted their government with what had been their own responsibilities, as well as their liberty. They lost both.

Where is our republic at age 230? A minister, Victor Paul Wierwille, once wrote in a booklet about ethics:

If a great proportion of the people of a republic display a greed for enjoyment with disregard for the rights and happiness of others, and a lack of self-discipline and a sense of duty, a republic becomes unworkable.

Many of you may be thinking, “We’re nearly there,” or “We ARE there.” Or “How great a proportion does it take?” I am not wise enough to know if we are too far gone, or if there is the possibility that we can avoid a total breakdown in the order of our society. I do not think we are yet at the point of no return, but we could be there soon.

English historian Christopher Dawson wrote in *Religion and the Rise of Western Culture*:

We have learnt that barbarism is not a picturesque myth or a half-forgotten memory of a long-passed stage of history, but an ugly underlying reality which may erupt with shattering force whenever the moral authority of a civilization loses its control.

In a letter to James Madison on November 5, 1786, prior to the convening of the Constitutional Convention the following May, George Washington shared a number of thoughts—and they were not all happy thoughts. The American Revolution had been won, and Washington had resigned his commission as commander of the Continental Army, but he had grave concerns for what he saw in the disunited United States. He wrote to Madison:

Let us look to our National character, and to things beyond the present period. No morn ever dawned more favourable than ours did—and no day was ever more clouded than the present! Wisdom, & good examples are necessary at this time to rescue the political machine from the impending storm. Virginia has now an opportunity to set the latter, and has enough of the former, I hope, to take the lead in promoting this great & arduous work. Without some alteration in our political creed, the superstructure we have been seven years raising at the expence of much blood and treasure, must fall. We are fast verging to anarchy & confusion!

Washington had heard about Shay's Rebellion in Massachusetts, the uprising by debtors against their creditors and by citizens opposing state and local tax collections. The letter continues:

A letter which I have just received from Genl Knox, who had just returned from Massachusetts (whither he had been sent by Congress consequent of the Commotion in that State) is replete with melancholy information of the temper & designs of a considerable part of that people. Among other things he says, "there creed is, that the property of the United States, has been protected from confiscation of Britain by the joint exertions of *all*, and therefore ought to be the *common property* of all. And he that attempts opposition to this creed is an enemy to equity & justice, & ought to be swept from off the face of the Earth."

Karl Marx or the socialists of our day could not have written it any better.

General Knox wrote to Washington that there were 12-15,000 in New England with these sentiments and that they were "chiefly the young and active part of the community."

Sound familiar?

Washington concluded his letter:

What stronger evidence can be given of the want of energy in our governments than these disorders? If there exists not a power to check them, what security has a man of life, liberty, or property? To you, I am sure I need not add aught on this subject, the consequences of a lax, or inefficient government, are too obvious to be dwelt on. Thirteen sovereignties pulling against each other, and all tugging at the foederal head will soon bring ruin on the whole; whereas a liberal, and energetic Constitution, well guarded, & closely watched, to prevent incroachments, might restore us to that degree of respectability & consequence, to which we had a fair claim, & the brightest prospect of attaining.

Washington, Madison and others went on to forge the Constitution the following spring and summer, and that Constitution did indeed restore us. It can restore us again, IF we restore IT. We must return to our Founding Principles: Individual freedom, limited government according to the written standard of our Constitution, a respect for life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness, which includes the rights of property. And we must return to the idea that the federal government should do a few important things and state and local governments should handle everything else.

We can all educate ourselves and share our knowledge with others. Let me suggest a few tools to help.

- If you are in the Atlanta, Georgia, area, see the Georgia Tea Party website at georgiateaparty.org for our schedule of meetings, documents and other resources.
- Courses on the Constitution, such as those from Hillsdale College. I recommend two courses in particular. Both of them are excellent:
 - Constitution 101, consisting of 10 lectures
 - Public Policy from a Constitutional Viewpoint, with 13 lectureshillsdale.edu/academics/free-online-courses/#politics
- “The Daily Signal” from the Heritage Foundation to help keep you current on national policies and progress toward restoring our nation to sound governing principles: dailysignal.com

- The website for the Foundation for Constitutional Education: constitutionaleducation.org for articles and other resources.

Together, we can continue to rebuild our fractured communities and restore our Constitution with sound knowledge, wisdom and action.

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