

The Decline and Fall of American Statesmanship



James W. Harris

In keeping with HUSTLER's long tradition of presenting even the most controversial viewpoints, we provide this space to outspoken opinion makers in politics, religion, the arts and other segments of contemporary society. This month's Guest Editorial is by James W. Harris, a widely published Georgia writer who specializes in politics and economics.

Any American who is at all concerned with the state of this country had to have watched the 1984 Presidential race with alarm and disgust. Here, after all, were the two candidates for the most powerful office in the world. One was a right-wing demagogue who betrayed every promise he made regarding economic and domestic matters and whose grasp of world affairs was terrifyingly primitive and simpleminded. His opponent was a political hack with debts to every two-bit left-of-center lobbying group in the country, who actually made a campaign pledge to increase the already-staggering tax burden on Americans and whose political "philosophy" was a grab bag of the worst elements of discredited New Deal liberalism.

Their recent predecessors were scarcely any better. Consider the inept, insider-controlled peanut farmer, Jimmy Carter, whose family and staff turned the White House into a Washington version of the *Beverly Hillbillies*. Think of the bumbling Gerald Ford and his preposterous plan to "Whip Inflation Now" by slapping WIN buttons on the chests of every true-blue American. Ponder the psychopathic Richard Nixon, the corrupt and murderous Lyndon Johnson, the John F. Kennedy of the Bay of Pigs and the Cuban Missile Crisis. . . .

It is no wonder that most Americans in the past several Presidential elections have voted *against* a candidate rather than *for* one. It is no wonder that fewer and fewer of our citizens are voting at all. And it is hardly surprising that the United States is being engulfed in a wave of cynicism regarding politics and politicians.

Frequently, when contemplating the vast sewer of contemporary American politics, one might wonder why our system no longer produces great statesmen. Where are the men and women of the caliber of Jefferson, Washington, Paine, Henry and the other Founding Fathers?

The answer is quite simple. Such men no longer participate, because they are not welcome. There is no place in either the Democratic or Republican parties for a Thomas Jefferson or a Patrick Henry. They would be viewed with contempt and hostility by those parties, and many voters would regard them with suspicion or fear.

The Founding Fathers were, after all, fiery radicals, inflamed with a profoundly revolutionary doctrine. In a world ruled by all-powerful monarchs, they dared to assert that men owned their own lives and possessed certain inalienable human rights—to life, liberty and property—that no one could rightfully abridge. They argued that when a govern-

ment violated these rights, it was just and proper for a people to rise up and overthrow that government.

Certainly, these men were not entirely in agreement with one another on the full implications of their radical views. Nor were they entirely consistent, as shown by the fact that many owned slaves or later supported tyrannical government actions. However, this general philosophy of inalienable human rights was a burning passion that united them.

These men—who deeply believed in such currently out-of-fashion and somewhat-disreputable doctrines as individual liberty, economic freedom and nonintervention abroad—clearly have no place today in mainstream American politics. Jefferson, for example, spoke out against federal censorship, argued at great personal risk for absolute separation of Church and State, and declared that a little revolution every now and then was a good way of keeping government in line. ("The tree of liberty must be refreshed from time to time with the blood of patriots and tyrants.")

Patrick Henry viewed federal taxation as a great evil and denounced tax collectors as "bloodsuckers." Jefferson, Richard Henry Lee, George Clinton, James Monroe, Samuel Adams and numerous other Founding Fathers condemned a standing peacetime U.S. Army as unnecessary and a grave threat to liberty. In example after example they took principled positions on foreign policy, economics and civil liberties that stand utterly opposed to those advocated by our present-day leaders.

Men of this caliber would no more join the Republican Party or the Democratic Party than they would sit on the cabinet of the Ayatollah Khomeini. They would instantly grasp something that most of us have yet to realize: that today's U.S. government is the mirror-opposite of the one that was founded 200-plus years ago. They would condemn the present massive government interference in the economy as a denial of basic human rights. They would denounce the monstrous income-tax levels—indeed, the income tax itself—as sheer armed robbery. They would demand the abolition of the Federal Reserve and the immediate dismantling of the vast majority of government offices. They would be the fiercest critics of today's foreign policy of global military involvement, intrigue, assassination and political intervention in the internal affairs of other nations.

They would be amazed and horrified by gun control, censorship laws, wage-and-price controls, immigration restrictions, draft registration, Social Security, welfare, victimless-crime laws—in short, by nearly every aspect of the modern

American government. They would revile that government as an enemy of human freedom at home and abroad. They would consider Reagan and Mondale to be tinhorn tyrants of the lowest, basest sort, and they would regard both major political parties as huge criminal gangs.

These men would of course be condemned as enemies of the State. The FBI and CIA would read their mail, tap their phones, videotape their gatherings and compile foot-thick dossiers on them. The American Legion would burn them in effigy and demand their deportation to Russia or Cuba or Nicaragua. Local police would raid their meetings and billy-club and teargas their supporters. Both the *Washington*

bawdy stories. Jefferson's reputed (though unproven) liaisons with a slave woman are well-known. Washington's declaration that "the government of the United States is in no sense founded upon the Christian religion" alone would lose him three-quarters of the vote. And Thomas Paine is *still* viewed with suspicion by many; until recently, most red-white-and-blue Americans shared Teddy Roosevelt's sneering (and utterly erroneous) dismissal of Paine as "a filthy little atheist."

These facts—plus revelations of many of the Founding Fathers' "scandalous" drinking and gambling habits—would be enough to ruin the political careers of the lot of them.

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Post and *National Review* would denounce their economics as inhumane, their domestic views as anarchistic and their foreign policy as naive and dangerous.

It would be miraculous if these men were not deported, lynched or hauled into federal prison. They would certainly be despised, ridiculed and rejected by the political and cultural establishment, as well as by the great mass of right-thinking Americans. To imagine them actually being able to take part in mainstream politics is absurd.

If, however, by some unlikely twist of fate they were actually allowed some voice in American politics, how could they participate in what passes for political debate in this country today?

Read the Declaration of Independence. Read the Bill of Rights (that document which is almost solely responsible for at least slowing this country's headlong dive into police-state status). Read Thomas Paine's magnificent *Common Sense* and *The Rights of Man*. Read *The Federalist Papers*—or even better the works of the Anti-Federalists.

From these works—aimed at the common man as well as the intellectual—you can clearly see that the political debate of 200 years ago was conducted on a plane far higher, far more elevated and far more intelligent than the moronic sloganizing and name-calling that passes for Presidential campaigning today.

How, then, could a Jefferson or a Paine deal with the imbecilic bleatings of a Reagan or a Mondale? How could the authors of the Declaration of Independence or *The Rights of Man* lower themselves to the swinish depths of contemporary political discussion?

Imagine Jefferson, after a fiery appeal for liberty solidly grounded upon logic and reasoning, being confronted with Walter Mondale cackling, "Where's the beef?" Imagine Paine or Washington or Henry confronted with the idiocies of the typical 30-second TV spot. Imagine them witnessing the spectacle of Ronald Reagan—author of the largest tax increase and the greatest deficits in U.S. history—branding his opposition as the "big spenders." It would be a sorry sight indeed, like watching a scholar argue logic with the village half-wit.

In any event, the Founding Fathers would have no chance whatsoever as soon as details of their private lives became generally known. John Hancock, after all, was a well-known smuggler. Benjamin Franklin wrote and published erotica, fathered an illegitimate son and was a ladies' man of international reputation. James Madison was known for his

They would be loudly denounced by every major newspaper and from every pulpit. Jerry Falwell's crackpot Moral Majority, Women Against Violence in Pornography and Media, the NAACP, Young Americans for Freedom—practically every civic and political organization in the country would unite with freelance smut-hounds, reformers, television evangelists and other tub-thumpers—both right- and left-wing—to condemn these men as public degenerates and moral menaces. Combined with their revolutionary ideologies, our forefathers' personal inclinations would make them social and political outcasts.

Despite this government's obvious contempt for the ideals of the American Revolution, despite decades of government propaganda and public-school brainwashing, courageous individuals who risk personal harm rather than submit to government tyranny still appear on the scene—people like the young men recently convicted for refusing to register for the draft; like the millions currently defying the IRS; like Larry Flynt, gunned down while fighting for freedom of the press.

These persons are, of course, as alien to mainstream politics as the Founding Fathers themselves would be. Yet here and there their influence begins to be felt, and their ideas take hold. There are a small number of men and women already dedicated to the ideals of individual liberty and economic freedom, and they are spreading these thoughts to their friends and associates. Others, too, begin to see that the standard American political divisions of "left" and "right" are mere artificialities, that gun control, high taxes, censorship, victimless-crime laws and militarism are actually not "conservative" or "liberal" issues, but are in fact all symptoms of the same sickness—the disease of imperialist, oppressive, tyrannical government. Someday, perhaps, a larger number of people will share this realization, and the result will be a second American Revolution.

In the meantime, surveying the gutter and tragicomedy that is mainstream American politics, one recalls the words of Henry David Thoreau, true when he wrote them in 1849 and a thousand times truer in 1985:

"How does it become a man to behave toward this American government today? I answered that he cannot without disgrace be associated with it."

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