

Which Revolution?

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Sunday, July 05, 2009

In my opinion, the best part of John F. Kennedy's inaugural address on January 20, 1961, had nothing to do with asking anyone anything. The moment to remember was when he said:

"The world is very different now. For man holds in his mortal hands the power to abolish all forms of human poverty and all forms of human life. And yet the same revolutionary beliefs for which our forebears fought are still at issue around the globe - the belief that the rights of man come not from the generosity of the state, but from the hand of God. We dare not forget today that we are the heirs of that first revolution."

It is interesting, even sadly ironic that what is going on in our nation right now does resemble an old revolutionary spirit, but not necessarily that of Lexington, Concord, or Philadelphia. In fact, a case can be made – if one looks closely – that the spirit of 2009 is more like the spirit of 1789 than 1776.

The American and French Revolutions are linked in our minds because of chronology; but they were vastly different affairs. One led to a new birth of freedom; the other to terror and tyranny. That one also became the model for horrors to come.

As our nation morphs its way along, en route to becoming what some liberal diehards very much want it to be, a significant number of people would seemingly prefer "Liberty – Equality – Fraternity" over "Life – Liberty – and the Pursuit of Happiness." And it is in the parsing of those vitally important words that we find the keys to understanding where we came from, where we are, and where we are going.

One revolution was about individual rights and dreams. The other was about "the people" as a group and the highest virtue being "the greater good." Can you guess which one is which?

When Thomas Jefferson wrote about "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness" in the Declaration of Independence, he was borrowing from 17th century English philosopher, John Locke, whose triad was "life, liberty, and property." Jefferson's use of this language was clearly designed to

describe the rights of individual people to live free, be free, and freely pursue their dreams in a free marketplace. Those thoughts were very much in presence in that Philadelphia birthing room.

The French Revolution, on the other hand – though similar to what happened here in the sense of changing things and breaking free from an old order – had little to do with individual rights. It was all about collectivism. And in many ways, the French Revolution is the ancestor of all totalitarian systems to follow. Hitler, Mussolini, Pol Pot, Lenin, and all other political gangsters were heirs of Robespierre and later, Napoleon. Those tyrannical manifestations were not misguided aberrations – distortions of something that started out good (like Lenin was cool, too bad Stalin messed it all up) – the seeds of the horror were present at the beginning.

Jean-Jacques Rousseau, 18th century Enlightenment philosopher, had written about *volonté générale* or "general will" and the Jacobins, followed by others, ran with it insisting that voice of "the people" could best, actually only, be expressed by so-called "enlightened" leaders.

Our revolution indeed drew a measure of strength from the Enlightenment, but it was of the earlier Locke variety. And America's use of Enlightenment concepts was tempered by something else; something that set it apart from what happened in France - a spiritual foundation.

Vive la revolution - Vive la difference.

The French not only declared war on the monarchy, they also attacked Christianity, replacing it with a religion of the state, introducing the worship of secularism. Sound familiar?

In America, it was very different. Now, I am not one of those who spends a lot of time trying to prove the Christian bona fides of our founding fathers, but I do believe that the influence of The Great Awakening, which ended about 20 years before the shot heard around the world was fired, was still very much a part of our national fabric at the time. And another such movement, usually referred to as The Second Great Awakening began while the French were unsuccessfully trying to figure out how to be free. To ignore those religious and cultural movements in America is to miss an important piece of the puzzle.

You see, the very concepts of liberty, equality, and fraternity sound nice and make for great propaganda. But in the end, without virtue born of something deeper and greater, it all ends up looking the same. This is why all totalitarian regimes like to call their realms The Peoples' this or that – like The People's Republic of China, or Democratic People's Republic of Korea, or The People's Commonwealth of Massachusetts.

Fast-forward 200 plus years and here we are remembering our revolutionary beginning. As we do so, let us beware of those who share our vocabulary, but use a different dictionary.

Are we still about the individual, personal, hard-fought-for rights: Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness, or does the cry: Liberty, Equality, Fraternity seem to increasingly be the spirit of this age?

The reason it has all worked and endured so well in this land is because we are a nation “under God.” There I said it. There is no real liberty without that. All attempts at actual freedom end up moving toward tyranny without some sense of higher purpose and power.

I believe firmly in the separation of church and state. But minus positive religious influence, a nation cannot long remain free.

Thomas Paine's story should be a cautionary tale. He, of course, wrote Common Sense in early 1776, and it was by all accounts vital to shaping public opinion in support of our patriotic ancestors. He was a revolutionary. In fact, there is a new book out by Glenn Beck, bearing the title Common Sense, using Mr. Paine's ideas as a springboard for his own thoughts about what is wrong with America and how to fix it. I have read Beck's book and like it. But I certainly hope he doesn't write a sequel, or at least delve further into Thomas Paine's bag of literary tricks to make future points about saving America.

Mr. Paine helped us early on, but as he moved on and shared more of his thinking via his acerbic pen, he expressed ideas that, while probably resonating with some today, would in no way mesh with the spirit of 1776.

While Common Sense supported the ideas of freedom, small government, and even low taxes – all very much part of that old revolutionary spirit – by the time the French were acting out, his writings became increasingly more

radical. When parts one and two of his work, The Rights of Man, appeared in 1791 and 1792, he became a pariah in England and fled to France where he was treated like a hero, being made an honorary citizen of the republic. But by this time, his writings advocated a progressive income tax, public works for the unemployed, and guaranteed minimum incomes.

And don't even get me started on his next bestseller, The Age Of Reason; a rant against revealed religion. Paine died virtually alone and penniless in 1809. Only six people attended his funeral.

This of course, brings us back full circle to the thesis of this article – that concepts of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, expressed individually (the intent of our founders), can only keep from drifting toward collectivism when there is a spiritual impulse – or at least a spiritual pulse.

C. S. Lewis said it very well in The Screwtape Letters more than 65 years ago:

“Hidden in the heart of this striving for Liberty there was also a deep hatred of personal freedom. That invaluable man Rousseau first revealed it. In his perfect democracy, only the state religion is permitted, slavery is restored, and the individual is told that he has really willed (though he didn't know it) whatever the Government tells him to do. From that starting point, via Hegel (another indispensable propagandist on our side), we easily contrived both the Nazi and the Communist state. Even in England we were pretty successful. I heard the other day that in that country a man could not, without a permit, cut down his own tree with his own axe, make it into planks with his own saw, and use the planks to build a tool shed in his own garden.”

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