

Do Americans Even Care about Freedom Anymore?

Think about the chief slogans for Campaign 2016, and then think back to the American founding. Something is missing. We have The Donald's "Make America Great Again" up against Hillary's "Stronger Together." The two are virtually interchangeable. In fact, in 1992 a candidate by the name of Bill Clinton thought his moment had arrived to make America great again. He said so repeatedly. And "stronger together?" Who knows what it means? For all that it might mean, it could just as easily be Trump's plea in 2016.

Both slogans are full of sound and fury, no, make that noise and fuzziness, and signify, well, signify . . . not much. While they may not be completely empty of meaning, they are thoroughly devoid of something that was not at all meaningless to those who established the American experiment in self-government.

The twin lodestars of that experiment were liberty and equality; they were not greatness and strength, much less togetherness. The founders assumed that greatness and strength, and perhaps even togetherness, would pretty much come along for the ride, so long as the country remained committed to liberty and equality.

Of course, the founders' understanding of equality would not match that of, say, Bernie Sanders. Perhaps that's because they were members of that allegedly evil 1%, assuming anyone was calculating—or worrying about—such percentages in the late 18th century. Then again, perhaps not. That's because equality meant something quite different to the generation that generated the American Revolution. Equality to them meant equality in the eyes of "Nature's God," as Jefferson put it. And if that was not enough, it also meant equality before the

law.

To be sure, there were serious limits to the founders' understanding of equality. Slaveholders that many of them were, they certainly didn't mean equality for *everyone*. Nor did they mean liberty for all. Like the rest of us, then and now, they had their flaws.

Despite those flaws, or perhaps in part because of them, they did understand the importance of liberty. Patrick Henry was one of them. We still recall and recite, "Give me liberty or give me death." (Interestingly enough, this Virginia slaveholder also understood equality, 18th century style, but he did not call out, "give me equality or give me death.")

Then there was a much lesser known founder father, Charles Carroll of Carrolltown to be specific. At the time of the Boston Tea Party this soon-to-be-signer of the Declaration of Independence sought to remind the Crown and Parliament that his fellow American colonists "are not yet corrupt enough to undervalue liberty."

It's hard to read those words without wincing—or at least flinching. It's also hard to read them without thinking about politics and a certain presidential election, circa 2016. Charges of corruption are everywhere; calls for liberty are nowhere to be heard.

Without benefit of public opinion polls, it would not be a stretch to conclude that Charles Carroll was right—for his time. But would he be right for ours?

The colonists were certainly concerned about corruption, London-initiated corruption, that is. *The* issue surrounding the Boston Tea Party was less the tea tax than the sweet deal that the British East India Company had negotiated with Parliament to monopolize the colonial tea market. To break free from England was to break free from that sort of

corruption, otherwise known as crony capitalism.

Are we Americans now so corrupt, or at least so inured to corruption, that we *do* undervalue liberty today? Ah, that is the question. The word “liberty” doesn’t come easily to Mr. Trump or Ms. Clinton. One promises strength; the other offers goodies. Where is liberty in all of this? Where indeed?

And corruption? Let’s not get started. We’ve had administrations that created clouds of corruption in their wake. But never have we had two major party candidates so engulfed in credible clouds of shadiness and shady dealings in advance of their possible presidency. Both are flawed in ways that would have deeply troubled our differently flawed founders.

I may have a hunch as to which of the two is more corrupt. You may have a differing hunch. I may have a hunch as to which of the two might be better able to lead us in the direction of liberty. You may have a differing hunch. Still, let’s not get started.

Instead, let’s ponder the words of Charles Carroll. And let’s especially ponder that little word “yet.” As we do so, let’s wonder about our own complicity in all of this. Thanks to the primary system, among other factors, we are much closer to being a democracy, rather than the republic that our founders envisioned—and intended. Therefore, are we now more likely to get the sort of leaders that we deserve (as opposed to the sort of leader that we might need)?

In other words, could a Charles Carroll survey America today, say what he said then—and be credible and believed? Or are we now too corrupt to value liberty?

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