

# When Virtue Becomes a Death Warrant

Earlier in the election, the idea was advanced that the moral character of a candidate no longer matters. Accordingly, the two main choices Americans have for president are individuals whose pasts are tainted by dishonesty and immorality.

One of these two candidates will eventually exhibit great control over American life, largely because of the current, all-powerful nature of our government. In light of this, it's interesting to note what "A Farmer" wrote in the spring of 1788 in what would eventually come to be known as an essay in [The Antifederalist Papers](#).

According to "A Farmer," the habits and character of a powerful, unrestrained leader soon become those of the country as a whole:

*"Here then we arrive at the summit of imperfection in human legislation – the magistrate whose will is law, is no longer restrained by the influence of manners ... his own inclinations become the manners of the empire..."*

As "A Farmer" goes on to note, when things reach such a state, "Virtue only breeds confusion in perverted government." History gives many examples of this, and replaces a society's virtue with vanity, revelry, and a disappearance of ideas:

*"However degrading and disgraceful the state of society just described may be... yet to the mass of the people it is not so afflicting as the loss of the other moral virtues, which in large governments, are exchanged for the fashionable vices of him who presides: – Under Caligula, the Roman legions were not ashamed to adorn their helmets with cockle-shells in triumph for their expedition against Britain, in which, they*

*never ventured to leave the shores of Gaul... During the reign of Nero, fiddling – dancing – singing – burning cities – plundering States – perfidy and assassination were the manners of the age... Domitian who like every man that from weakness – vicious heart – or the allurements of pleasure, deserts the paths of virtue – hated cordially those examples of merit which he could not imitate. Tacitus informs us, that during his life – **virtue became a death warrant** – Philosophy fled... in short, nothing was honourable or profitable but assassinations, informations, and all sorts of corruptions and pollutions.”*

Such warnings, “A Farmer” explains “are intended for the thinking part of our citizens” because “America has more to dread from the want of information than the want of integrity in her rulers...”

It’s fairly obvious that America’s leaders are lacking in integrity. It’s also pretty clear that many Americans are no longer able to think for themselves, largely because they have not been equipped with the knowledge to make informed decisions.

One wonders if these declines in the virtue of our leaders and the knowledge of our citizens resulted from an ever powerful government, or vice versa?

More importantly, have we reached a point where virtue is no longer an asset, but an albatross? Are we closer than we think to this state described by Tacitus where virtue becomes a death warrant?