

The Dead Will Have Their Say

In his classic work [Orthodoxy](#), G.K. Chesterton penned these profound words about tradition:

Tradition is only democracy extended through time. ... Tradition may be defined as an extension of the franchise. Tradition means giving votes to the most obscure of all classes, our ancestors. It is the democracy of the dead. Tradition refuses to submit to the small and arrogant oligarchy of those who merely happen to be walking about. All democrats object to men being disqualified by the accident of birth; tradition objects to their being disqualified by the accident of death. Democracy tells us not to neglect a good man's opinion, even if he is our groom [servant]; tradition asks us not to neglect a good man's opinion, even if he is our father.

For those with no interest in tradition, Chesterton's words may appear meaningless or, worse, ridiculous. After all, these people might say, the dead are dead, and those who are either ignorant of history or who disdain tradition will pay Chesterton little attention.

We see these forces of ignorance and contempt at work today regarding our American past. Knowledge of our history among students is abysmal, and even many adults have never read the Declaration of Independence or the Bill of Rights. They're clueless about the past; for instance, about the accomplishments of men and women like John and Abigail Adams, the events surrounding the Civil War, and the enormous contributions of the United States and capitalism to people around the globe following World War II.

Those on the extreme left go even further by attempting to obliterate altogether America's heroes and past accomplishments. They rewrite history books, tear down

statues, and seek to replace merit with equity and liberty with tyranny. If we rid ourselves of the morality and customs of the past, they say, we can step into a shining utopia, a heaven on earth freed from the shackles of old ideas, Judeo-Christian codes of morality, and a baneful, biased tradition.

If they are still around to witness the consequences of their actions, these radicals are likely in for a shock. They claim they are on the right side of history by pitching American traditions into a dumpster and replacing them with relativism and collectivism, but the past is rarely kind to tyrants and bullies.

They've also apparently forgotten that the dead still speak to all who care to listen. All of us alive today, for instance, still benefit from the gifts of wisdom inherited from our immediate ancestors. Born nearly a century ago, my now-deceased parents taught me a work ethic, manners, and morals that I have in turn passed on to my children. Mom and Dad doubtless learned many of these same lessons in their own adolescence, meaning these whispers from the past extend even further back in time.

These same voices of the dead speak to us in the laws, documents, and deeds of our more famous ancestors. Revisionists can assault Thomas Jefferson as racist and sexist, but his Declaration of Independence will continue to stand as one of the world's greatest monuments to liberty. They can attack the writers of our Constitution for the same reasons but again cannot erase the freedoms that that remarkable document brought to a new nation. Hike in a national park and the ghost of Theodore Roosevelt walks at your side. Turn on a light bulb, drive a car, take a prescribed medicine, fly in an airplane, and men like Thomas Edison and Henry Ford deserve at least a tip of the hat.

Behind all of these famous figures is that long, winding line of our more anonymous forebears, men and women like my

ancestors and yours who built this country, often at the risk of death, and who pursued the American Dream of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness so that their children's children could do the same. If we listen closely, these voices of the dead also speak to us through memoirs, movies, novels, poetry, songs, and even tombstones.

The fact is the dead only truly die when we living let them die. Whenever we teach our children the truth about America, the good and the bad, we keep the dead alive. When we stand against lies and oppression, whether delivered from the left or the right, we honor and remember the dead. And when we step into a voting booth this November, at our elbow will be a great host of spirits whispering a single word whose magic and beauty so many of us seem to have forgotten: "America!"

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