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A Return to Our Principles

By Sarah McIntosh

A couple of weeks ago I met Thomas Jefferson. I was at the City Tavern in Philadelphia which was where the First Continental Congress unofficially met and where many American leaders gathered in the late 1700s and early 1800s.

The City Tavern is now a restaurant that specializes in providing a colonial experience including hosting famous American leaders such as Thomas Jefferson. It was easy to become immersed in the actor's portrayal of this American Diplomat and the experience served as a reminder of important ideals all too frequently forgotten - Jeffersonian Principles.

The harried pace and vast scope of contemporary politics allows for the ease of such memory lapses. At any one moment there are an immense number of issues and policies debated locally and nationally. Instead of allowing ourselves to be overwhelmed by day-to-day policy decisions, however, it is vital for the health of American democracy that we remember and continue to apply the underlying principles upon which our government was founded.

While the phrase Jeffersonian Principles can refer to a great many things, the most far-reaching is that of limited government. Jefferson was a proponent of a representative democracy and self-government where people participated in the process and served as the ultimate check on state power.

Perhaps the most basic and most important concept within Jeffersonian Principles is the understanding that there are inalienable rights. The government does not "give" one the right to something. Instead, rights are part and parcel of humanity. Unfortunately, while governments cannot be create rights, they can violate them.

Granted, according to Jefferson the proper cycle of laws ends every nineteen years. The premise behind this is that later generations should not be morally bound by their predecessors' decisions. Jefferson was keen enough to imagine that government would naturally grow with time.

While Americans have decided not to have a revolution every nineteen years and re-create our government from scratch, it is true that our laws and government do change daily. In light of this, the founding principles that built our republic should not be thrown the wayside.

Jefferson was wise enough to recognize that just as it is in the nature of humans to possess inalienable rights, it is in the nature of governments to expand and erode those rights. For every power we give to the state we lose power as individuals. As Kansans we have a unique perspective on this issue. Kansans have a legacy and culture of independence and taking care of oneself and community. For this sense of community we only need to look back a short time to the Greensburg tornado. After the tornado the community worked together to help each other and were ready to rebuild before the government tried to step in.

Kansans will stop when they see someone on the side of the road with car trouble and will often put their own needs aside to help others---this is something that has sadly been lost in much of the country. For every time we give government more power, a greater role, we start believing that is the government's job, not our own.

But depending on government to take care of you is not only constitutionally repulsive but it also destroys the advantages of a community. If you have to wait for the "government" to help you on the side of the road you will wait longer and create more danger for yourself as time goes on. If you depend on government to help you in times of need you will lose control of decisions that will directly affect your life and will be left waiting for the bureaucratic process to proceed.

Besides losing efficiency of help we lose something much more precious - that right of self-government that Jefferson felt was at the core of what it means to be human. As government grows people lose track of day-to-day decisions; they become lackadaisical and apathetic. People spend less and less time participating in their government and working with their communities. If people fail to guard their own liberties and serve as a check on government they will lose those liberties.

Maybe Jefferson said it best, "It behooves our citizens to be on their guard, to be firm in their principles, and full of confidence in themselves. We are able to preserve our self-government if we will but think so."

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