

Democracy and Sacred Honor
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Our founding fathers, particularly James Madison, was aware that a new, participatory republic needed protection against the frailties of human behavior. Madison was aware that power can transform a good man into a tyrant, a phenomenon well known throughout history.

Almost any system of government, monarchy, dictatorship, democracy, can be a good system if the leader is an upright man. But therein is the hitch: most leaders with unconstrained power do not remain good men.

Hereditary monarchy, one of our oldest ruling systems, offers examples of great and wise kings (Persia\222s Cyrus the Great, the Hebrews\222 King Solomon the Wise, whose successors and offspring were not great or wise. The Chinese imperial system provided for public recognition that the emperor had lost the mandate of heaven when his behavior endangered the country.

One can love a great or wise monarch, but the flawed notion of linear inheritance has given us a history of dreadful kings and tyrants. This system does not protect us from a mad or exceedingly stupid king. When a legitimate Turkish sultan grew tired of his harem ladies, he had them all put in sacks and drowned in the sea. This was just a sample of what he intended for his empire.

As monarchy began to lose its luster among the 17th century Protestants who colonized the New World, the idea arose to look back many centuries to the systems invented by the ancient Greeks and Romans. The Greeks of Athens created a pure democracy that permitted every free Athenian property owner to vote in public for their leaders. It worked well at first, but over time, deteriorated as the powerful figured out how to bribe and corrupt the voters.

The Romans created a better system, one in which an elected senate of educated and propertied men (elites) ruled. Elected executives, Consuls, administered the government and during times of emergency could perform as temporary dictators. In Rome\222s earlier days, the leadership was expected to be upright, observing the Roman norm of "virtue," (manliness that was honorable and strong). Again, this good system deteriorated over time and men with less sterling character rose to power.

Senators were elected by bribing the citizens (providing bread and circuses). A temporary dictator, Julius Caesar, decided to make it permanent. He was assassinated by his friends, who then fell to fighting with each other. The Republic was replaced by an Empire, with a relative of Julius Caesar, Augustus, ruling. Augustus was followed by increasingly horrible offspring.

Knowing these histories well, the Protestant Founding Fathers surrounded power with institutions to prevent abuse: a Senate with two men from each state, a Congress that apportioned representatives according to population numbers in each state, and an independent Supreme Court, all of them with equal power to the Presidency. Madison would protect us from tyrants, incompetents, and the corrupt in each of these institutions through the process of Impeachment by Congress. A new institution, the Press, was intended to expose corruption and to speak truth to power.

But there was one more element that we think little about today: character. Such words as "sacred honor" meant something to the elites of the day. Good men were those who were honorable, unselfish, courageous, and intelligent. Decency was an essential element of a person with sacred honor.

After the election of Andrew Jackson, our republic became a shabby place for decades, until the election of Abraham Lincoln, who knew right from wrong. His assassination ended this model for the rest of the 19th century. Capitalism became the great power of the day, with robber barons "buying" toadies in the government to do their will.

But something interesting happened as the robber barons grew old: their Protestant values re-emerged and many (like many of our billionaires today) turned philanthropist. Protestant values emphasize uprightness, decency, duty, and even empathy.

We have taken these values for granted; they are our norms. But these norms are being bludgeoned by a wrecking-ball in the White House. He has done us the favor of reminding us that an entertaining con game is no substitute for sacred honor.

682 words

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