

Our Founding Fathers envisioned a system of governance based on division of powers and rule of law. The consent of the governed was to be by election of qualified voters: initially, White men who had some property.

The assumption was that men with property would have skin in the game, be literate, pragmatic, and thoughtful. Another assumption was that voters would want their officials to be men of "honor," but the founders knew that honorable men would not always use their power honorably. They provided checks and balances, impeachments and removals, in the event of a selfish, dishonorable government official.

Things have changed since our country's founding. The governed who vote have been increased over time to include: first, all white men (property or not), then emancipated Black men, then women, and finally even lowering the voting age to all citizens who are 18. But the original assumption was still in place: that those representing or judging us must be people of "good character."

Until now, good character was still the rule for elected officials. The problem, however, is the definition of good character: people of integrity and honor. The definition of an "honorable man" differs from one culture to another. In some cultures, honor consists of keeping the family's womenfolk from sexual infidelity or public shame. This is not the belief system of Western Civilization.

The founders defined an honorable man as one who does his duty, is truthful, and in his responsibilities never puts himself first. However, they did not consider slave ownership an issue, since it was legal and traditional in some states. They also were disinterested in how the honorable man behaved toward his own family: sexual loyalty was a private matter, not a public issue.

But today, our culture adheres to the notion that our officials must tell the truth, put duty before self-interest, and even behave sexually with fidelity to wife and not abuse their power to sexually exploit their employees. Sexual misbehavior once required instant resignation by an offender, thanks to public pressure.

Aside from sexual misbehavior, accepting or soliciting bribes can be prosecuted, and more than one official, from governors to judges and representatives, have been sentenced to prison. This is all to the good, and justifies the Founding Fathers' belief in their system of protecting a good republic.

Our political parties have generally done a decent job in vetting candidates for office. Party regulars used to personally know the people they were putting up for election, from Presidents down to city councilmen. Judges were generally selected from lists of candidates vetted by their professional organization, the Bar Association. With a few exceptions, most of them during the 19th century and the 1920s (think of Andrew Johnson and Warren Harding) and certainly since 1950, our presidents have been dutiful, honorable men.

We assumed that these values were so established that we would never have a really dishonest, dishonorable president who would use his power to corrupt every institution of government through his appointments, from judges to Cabinet heads. We assumed that the behavior that we expected from the president was secure, safe in the oversight of Congress or the courts.

We assumed wrong. Nixon was corrupt and Trump lies constantly, removes and fires officials he cannot corrupt or intimidate, and serves as a wrecking ball over domestic and foreign policy norms that we considered assured. His own lawlessness has spread to his party members who behave, as one Republican representative from Texas did, during a Justice Committee hearing.

He tapped continuously on the microphone to keep the witness from being heard. When reprimanded by the committee chair, he announced that there was no law against making noise. Indeed, we never needed a law before this; it was a norm of good behavior.

We had better revalue honor and integrity or lose our system of rule of law. The price for ignoring this can happen between the next election and the next president's inauguration. Prepare for a dishonorable president to deny his electoral loss.

Character matters. We know this now.

683 words

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