

CHAPTER 16

A FRAGILE FREEDOM

Numerous and fearsome dangers threatened the coveted freedom of the young nation. A constant quest for power by some, anxious fear of armed citizens by others, a self-defeating complacency or, worse, indifference in the people's oversight of their evolving governments and rights all frustrated and worried those charged with the duty to protect their freedom. After all they had endured to earn it, it was certain that America's new freedom was, and would always be, vulnerable.

Our earliest countrymen lived in a world trapped between pompous, condescending fools and proud, fierce natives. Their leaders were, for the most part, educated men for whom common sense was central to their thinking. They had to be poised and judicious to win the battles they faced. They had learned all too well the fragility of freedom; a freedom under constant threat from within and without. A freedom which, unless safeguarded by all who are privileged to enjoy it, would certainly meet a slow and agonizing fate.

They simply could not allow that to happen.

Good sense and a keen awareness of prior social experiments that had failed (most), contrasted with those that had worked (few), formed their governing priorities. Tyranny had to be made a virtual impossibility in America. The constitution that would emerge had to be unbreakable, resistant to all attempts to undermine or bend it to suit a powerful majority or a clever minority. A sensible, hard-working, educated and orderly populace must be ensured.

Success based on anything other than courage, social cooperation and vigilance had to be regarded as offensive to all. And only a virtuous and moral people could make and keep the independence they had long yearned for and were determined to produce.

The potential price of failure was just too high. Read their warnings to the generations who would follow—including ours.

DAY 205

THOMAS PAINE

"Arms discourage and keep the invader and plunderer in awe, and preserve order in the world as well as property... Horrid mischief would ensue were the law-abiding deprived of the use of them."

Thoughts On Defensive War, 1775

Today Mr. Paine might write:

Weapons demoralize and intimidate those who terrorize and capture; weapons keep people and their property safe and the world from becoming chaotic... Horrible suffering would result if law-abiding people were prohibited from using them.

DAY 206

SAMUEL ADAMS

"Our enemies would fain have us lie down on the bed of sloth and security, and persuade ourselves that there is no danger: They are daily administering the opiate with multiplied arts and delusions; and I am sorry to observe, that the gilded pill is so alluring to some who call themselves the friends of liberty. But is there no danger when the very foundations of our civil constitution tremble?"

*Essay published in The Boston Gazette (as "Candidus"),
October 14, 1771*

Today Mr. Adams might write:

Our rivals hope that we just relax and recline—convincing ourselves there’s no danger. Every day they feed us artful lies as a sedative. It’s painful to watch so many self-described “freedom lovers” gulp down their golden pill. But... can we really ever be safe while the core of our constitution is shifting?

DAY 207

EDMUND BURKE

"Tyrants seldom want pretexts... Those who have been once intoxicated with power, and have derived any kind of emolument from it, even though but for one year, never can willingly abandon it. They may be distressed in the midst of all their power; but they will never look to any thing but power for their relief."

To a member of the [British] National Assembly, 1791

Today Mr. Burke might write:

Bullies seldom lack reasons to justify their actions... Once they've had a taste of ultimate control—even a small morsel—and found it delicious, they can never give it up. Their power might make them miserable but the only medicine they'll take for their disease is more power.

DAY 208

THOMAS JEFFERSON

"The natural progress of things is for liberty to yield and government to gain ground. As yet our spirits are free."

To Colonel Carrington, May 27, 1788

Today Mr. Jefferson might write:

It's natural for a free government to grab more power as long as free people allow them to. So far, our spirits have stayed free.