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Ideological Conflicts in Early American Books

Clarence H. Faust

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COMMON SENSE;

ADDRESSED TO THE

I N H A B I T A N T S

O F

A M E R I C A,

On the following interesting

S U B J E C T S.

I. Of the Origin and Design of Government in general, with concise Remarks on the English Constitution.

II. Of Monarchy and Hereditary Succession.

III. Thoughts on the present State of American Affairs.

IV. Of the present Ability of America, with some miscellaneous Reflections.

A NEW EDITION, with several Additions in the Body of the Work. To which is added an APPENDIX; together with an Address to the People called QUAKERS.

N. B. The New Addition here given increases the Work upwards of One-Third.

*Man knows no Master save creating Heaven,
Or those whom Choice and common Good ordain.*

THOMSON.

PHILADELPHIA, PRINTED;

LONDON, RE-PRINTED,

For J. ALLEN, opposite Burlington-House in Piccadilly. 1776.

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Ideological Conflicts in Early American Books

by Clarence H. Faust

The following is an address given by Dr. Clarence H. Faust at the 1957 Syracuse University Scholastic Achievement Dinner. Almost twenty years later, when we are celebrating the bicentennial anniversary of our country, it seems important to review the conflicts inherent in the American expression of democracy which are so clearly outlined by the late Dr. Faust.

“This address was first printed in 1958 as a souvenir book by the Syracuse University Press, which has courteously granted permission to reprint it here. Then Chancellor of Syracuse University William P. Tolley wrote in his introduction to that booklet:

“Dr. Faust is a gifted teacher who for many years added lustre to the Department of English at the University of Chicago. He is also a skillful administrator with long experience as Dean of the College and Dean of the Graduate School of Library Science at the University of Chicago; and later as Director of Libraries, Dean of Humanities and Sciences and Acting President at Stanford University. He was elected President of the Fund for the Advancement of Education in 1951, and [was, for a time,] Vice President of the Ford Foundation. A deep concern for problems of higher education and imaginative leadership in educational administration have not lessened his interest in more specialized studies. His volume, with Professor [Thomas E.] Johnson, on Jonathan Edwards is still the most useful annotated collection of the works of that important figure. In 1954 he published a major contribution to American Studies, The Decline of Puritanism.”



IT IS A VERY GREAT pleasure to be present at the significant cluster of events at Syracuse University during these two days—the dedication of a great collection of books, the Annual Scholastic Achievement Dinner, and the opening of the new offices of the University Press. These events, taken together, have a striking symbolic significance. They symbolize the essence of the University, the fact that its activities center in, revolve around, and exist for the life of the mind. The intellectual life of the University has three aspects—the inheritance of ideas, the study and discussion of them, and their dissemination. Thus the University's collection of books, the intellectual work of its faculty and students, and publication are the chief facets of its central concern with knowledge.

The critical element in this triad is, of course, the activities of scholars and students—the work in libraries, classrooms, and laboratories where ideas are examined, discussed, and clarified. The very life of a university is threatened by anything which checks the full and free and open and constant discussion and examination of ideas. In our day, universities stand in some danger—and so consequently does the society universities serve—that as a result of external pressures or of internal loss of confidence freedom of discussion will decline. The threat is, of course, not new to this generation, and perhaps we shall understand it more fully and have better insights about how to deal with it if we trace the historical roots of the current anti-intellectualism to the period of our national birth, the eighteenth century.

The ideas and institutions of the eighteenth century have inevitably persisted, however modified in form, into the twentieth.



There is much to be said for the analogy on which Edmund Burke insisted in his *Reflections on the French Revolution*, namely, that we inherit our political principles and institutions from our forebears as we receive from them our lives and our property. One side of this inheritance, the great democratic institutions and ideas which have come down to us from our eighteenth-century forefathers, is frequently stressed. Its other side, especially certain conflicts of theory which still trouble us, is much less often, in fact very rarely, considered.

It is perfectly clear that we owe the form of government under which we live and the freedoms we enjoy as a people to the wise and courageous men who conceived and brought forth upon this continent a new nation, under a new form of government, a political society without a succession of crowned monarchs or a hereditary aristocracy—a government of the people, by the people, and for the people. And we inherited from the Founding Fathers much more than a machinery of government. We are indebted to them for a clear formulation of the principles on which such a government could be justified and its scope and purposes determined.

“We hold these truths to be self-evident,” wrote the framers of the Declaration of Independence, “that all men are created equal; that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights; and that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.” I take it that these words were intended to be more than merely mouth-filling and ear-tingling phrases. And I take it as the sign of a deep malady in our contemporary life, to which I should like to turn our attention tonight, that many of us would be inclined to grant, if challenged to defend what Jefferson called self-evident truths, that these words cannot be taken literally, but must be regarded as the kind of rhetorical flag which a political party always waves over the position it wishes to occupy.

To say that Jefferson meant what he said in calling these propositions about the equality of man self-evident truths and that



he was here speaking not for himself alone but for the majority of his fellow citizens, on whose behalf the declaration of our independence from Great Britain was written, is not to say that the Founding Fathers were unanimous in their political philosophies. They were divided by deep religious differences—Protestant, Catholic, and the anti-clerical and anti-ecclesiastical Deist. There were deep philosophical differences among them as respects the nature of man, whether primarily good or evil, whether or not possessed of freedom of will. There were, furthermore, sharp differences of interests, especially those which set the agrarian sections of the country in opposition to the mercantilist areas. In the framing of our Constitution, these differences created such serious difficulties that as one member of the Constitutional Convention of 1789 put it, representatives of the various states were often held together in their discussions by “a hair” and the dissolution of the Convention and the consequent collapse of its work were an almost daily expectation.

We are the inheritors not only of the tremendous positive benefits of the American form of government and of the enunciation of principles which justify and govern its operation, but also of the conflicts of interests and ideas in Colonial America. It is my thesis tonight that some of the difficulties we have inherited threaten now, perhaps even more seriously than they did in the eighteenth century, the healthy continuation of the way of life and government which has been developed in America.

The difficulties presented by the religious and philosophical diversity of the eighteenth century and by the sharp clash of the interest groups then affecting political life were resolved by two important means when our Constitution was framed. The first of these was the wise recognition by the Founding Fathers that agreements concerning courses of action might be reached by people holding quite different theoretical positions. The second was the confidence of our political forebears in the effectiveness of sustained, rational discussion among people who disagree.



Our Constitution would never have been formulated if its framers had insisted upon complete unanimity in a philosophy of government as a prerequisite to agreement about the nature of the political institutions and the modes of operations of these institutions for the country. The Constitutional Convention focused attention, therefore, upon the structure of government and upon the rules of its operation. Thus men who held different views about the proper relationships of agriculture and industry, about the loyalty to state governments as over against loyalty to a national one, and even about the political status of the Negro were able, despite these differences, to agree upon a government of three branches, on the modes of election or appointment of officers in these various branches, on the terms of office in each case, on the spheres of authority of the executive, judicial, and legislative arms of government, and on the scopes of authority of state and national governmental institutions. The concentration of the Founding Fathers upon the form and operation of government has given this country the incalculable benefit of an instrument to preserve peace without requiring absolute unanimity or conformity in the areas of ideas and thought.

We are so accustomed to the situation we have inherited from our eighteenth-century framers of government that we tend to forget how amazing their achievement was. Its results are to be seen in every presidential election. Two parties which through the campaign have seemed bitterly opposed at the level of ideas—two massive groups ardently convinced of the rightness of their position, each viewing with alarm the ideas of its opponents, and pushing its candidates as though the life of the country depended upon their election—will, when the machinery of the election has completed its operation, unite peacefully under the leadership of the winner. The losing candidate does not muster his supporters for a revolution. Instead he sends a telegram of congratulations and assurances of support to his successful opponent. And the winning candidate feels no need to protect himself by literal or



figurative execution of his opponents. We have, in short, learned that men who disagree strongly on very important questions can live together in peace. I shall want in a moment to come to certain hazards in this arrangement, which I merely mention here; namely, the tolerance of differences of opinion may lead to indifference about ideas and thus in a subtle way undermine the principles which constitute the foundations of our political society.

The second resource, as the Founding Fathers saw it, for handling disagreements without concentration camps or thought control was freedom of discussion. Freedom of discussion in America rested not upon contempt for ideas but upon confidence in the power of ideas. In his great pronouncement of freedom of speech, the *Areopagitica*, John Milton took a position to which eighteenth-century leaders of American thought came to adhere and he put the case in words which have been reiterated through the centuries: "So long as truth be in the field," he said, "we do her injustice in suppressing freedom of expression." What Milton and later our forefathers had in mind was not that in the din of conflicting opinions truth would by some magic speak in the clearest and loudest voice, but rather that in sustained and systematic discussion of opposing points of view, error would be discovered and truth would emerge and be consolidated. As they saw it, the advancement of truth by free discussion of ideas was not an automatic or even an easy process. They had no confidence, I am sure, that in the mere announcement of conflicting propositions those which were true would at a glance seem obviously right. They placed their confidence in rational discourse—in the rigorous statement not merely of conclusions but of premises and connections of thought. In this process, the partial errors of half truths would to some extent be pruned away, inadequate statements of truth would be reshaped to bring words and ideas into some greater harmony with the real nature of things, and contradictions and inconsistencies would be resolved in slow and painful steps toward truth.



One of our gravest dangers today—perhaps the most serious that our democracy faces—is the increase of doubts about the effectiveness of reasoned and reasonable discourse—doubts, indeed, that the kind of progress toward truth on which the best tradition of Western culture placed its confidence can be truly realized.

Now the roots of these doubts lie, as I see it, as firmly in the soil of the eighteenth century as do the roots of our government and the principles of which it is the flower. Our doubts are as firmly rooted in the eighteenth century as our beliefs. I should like to uncover three roots of our doubts about reasoned discourse in the hope that the examination of them may suggest how our confidence in such discourse may be recovered. For unless we can recover that confidence and learn to act upon it effectively, we must resign ourselves to the effects of propaganda and ultimately of physical force. If reasoned and reasonable thought and discourse are repudiated, or disdained, or neglected, they will inevitably be replaced by emotion and propaganda, and eventually the conflict of emotion and propaganda must be resolved by physical violence. Each of the early sources of our distrust of reasoned discourse was originally an aspect of a theory of the role of reason in human affairs, and out of three views of that role and the strains of thought in America of which they were parts, a formidable cluster of distrust of rational discourse has been formed.

One of these strains in American thought is exemplified in the works of Tom Paine whose pronouncements in favor of separation from the mother country were perhaps the most important single incitement of the Revolution. As even John Adams who had no sympathy with Paine's religious position and very little for his political theories put it, Tom Paine's *Common Sense* made the bells of the thirteen colonies ring together. Tom Paine's position was a simple and persuasive one. He appealed to common sense, meaning not what we generally designate by the term,



namely, the practical ideas of practical people, but rather those general ideas of right and wrong, of justice and injustice, which are common to all men—even, as he put it, to those of the meanest capacities. A typical appeal to common sense in Paine’s use of the term is his argument that government must either rise out of the people or be imposed upon the people, that imposition of rule upon people is tyranny, and that consequently all governments not established by the consent of the governed are usurpations. Such reflections as these were possible, as he saw it, to all men, learned and unlearned, experienced or inexperienced, possessors of high intellectual gifts and those of the most limited capacities. They required, furthermore, no knowledge of tradition and rested on no appeal to historical experience. Tradition, as Paine saw it, was simply a formula to cover the injustices which the ambition and greed of powerful men had brought into the world. Tradition had better be forgotten. History was the painful record of man’s injustices to man. It should not be consulted as a guide to the formation of political institutions. We must, Paine wrote in one of his pamphlets, “think as though we were the first men who ever thought.”

What Paine and the many who agreed with him, at least in his political theory, introduced into American thought was, then, a contempt for tradition and history. Attacking Edmund Burke’s *Reflections on the French Revolution*, he decried the appeal to historical precedent. Those who examine such precedents, he said, trace a course backward from error to error and end in utter confusion. They are fortunate if they do not end in utter wickedness. The notion that the ways of life mankind has painfully worked out might with profit be examined by us now, and that words of earnest and thoughtful men reflecting upon these matters might merit our study, Paine dismissed with contempt.

A second imputation of the range of reasoned discourse may be illustrated from the writings of so great a man as Benjamin Franklin. Franklin was impatient with Paine’s appeal to general



abstract principles. For him, the soundest lessons are those of experience and history. The argument that taxation without representation was tyranny left him relatively cold. He preferred to consult the more practical oracles of experience. Thus he found no serious objection to the Stamp Tax when it was first proposed. He argued for the right of Colonial legislatures to fix taxes on the ground that when people have to bear burdens, experience indicates they bear them more cheerfully when these burdens are, or the people think they are, imposed on them by themselves. Franklin's confidence in the lessons of history is illustrated in the plans he drew up for the curriculum of a new academy he was instrumental in forming in Philadelphia. The core of the curriculum was instruction in history. Ethics, citizenship, and even the importance of religion were to be conveyed through the channels of instruction in history.

In short, Franklin's position was the antithesis of Tom Paine's. Distrusting the generalizations of abstract thought, he placed his confidence on the particulars of experience or of history. In this respect he was in harmony with the spirit of the developing new sciences of the century. In the political sphere where experimentation is impossible equivalent progress toward truth might be made through the analysis of historical experience. The consequence of such thinking was a dramatic reversal with respect to what might be taken as demonstrably true.

This reversal may be seen by comparing the position which so skeptical a philosopher as Hume took with the position we commonly take today. Hume pointed out that experience, and this would include the lessons of history, can at best establish a high degree of probability. That matters have proceeded in a particular pattern time and again makes it highly likely that they will so proceed in the future. But it makes it only highly likely or highly probable. On the other hand, the analysis of abstract ideas may give absolute demonstration. For example, that two sides of a triangle must always in their combined length be great-



er than the third side, or that a part must always be less than the whole of which it is a part—these are absolute and incontrovertible truths. The mind cannot even conceive the contrary of these propositions. The lines of reasoning in which they emerge must thus constitute absolute demonstration. But the proposition that the sun will rise tomorrow morning, which is based upon our experience of many such risings in the past, can be at best only probable, though highly probable indeed. The mind can conceive of the failure of the sun to rise. Now in this point of view abstract reasoning produces absolute demonstration, while the most careful experimentation and the shrewdest analysis of history can indicate only the probable. Compare this with our own view of these matters. We tend to suppose that general and abstract propositions are mere opinions and that science gives us the highest of certainties. We owe this point of view in no small measure to those men of the eighteenth century who like Franklin placed little confidence in abstract generalizations but gave wholehearted assent to the conclusions reached from the particulars of experience or of observation or of history.

A third strain of eighteenth-century thinking seems to bear upon the accumulation of doubts about reason and rational discourse which underlie the anti-intellectualism of our time. This strain is best exemplified perhaps in such religious writers as the Puritans Thomas Shepard and Jonathan Edwards. What troubled Shepard and Edwards was the fact that men who seem fully aware intellectually of the evils of sin and the dangers of eternal damnation nevertheless persevered in their wicked courses. They explained this fact by distinguishing between two kinds of ideas—*notional* ideas and *real* ideas. Thomas Shepard illustrated the point by describing the difference of our reaction to the sight of a lion painted on the wall and represented in the act of leaping toward us with foaming jaws, as contrasted with our reaction to a real lion. In the one case, he pointed out, though we see the details of the lion clearly, our feelings are not involved. In the other, we



are deeply disturbed in our emotions. Now, the tendency of this line of thinking is to conclude that it is the emotional element in thought rather than its clarity or precision, its logical cogency and conclusiveness, which is most significant. A man is saved, according to Edwards, not because he entertains true ideas, for even the devil knows the truth, but because he has acquired what Edwards called "a relish" for the truth. Putting it another way, Edwards insisted that truth must be not merely a possession of the mind but a state of the soul. In God's Elect the whole being, not merely the intellectual faculties, is involved.

It is but a step, not a very long one, from this view to the position that it is not ideas but feelings or attitudes which matter. If the theological commitments of the position are stripped away, the position becomes very modern indeed. I need only, I think, appeal to your own observations and reflections to establish the length to which dependence upon feeling, emotion, or attitude takes precedence in our time over dependence upon the processes of reasoned thought.

Tom Paine was confident of the processes of abstract thought and contemptuous of tradition and history. Franklin was confident of the illumination experience in history could provide and contemptuous of abstract generalizations. Men like Shepard and Edwards opened the way at least to contempt for both abstract thinking and the analysis of history and experience and to the placing of dependence upon right feelings, right emotions, right attitudes, in short, upon something other than the processes of thought. One way of stating our present difficulties about reasonable and reasoned attempts to resolve political and philosophical questions is to suggest that we suffer from the accumulation of the negatives of these strains of our tradition. We accept disdain for abstract thought, which we see not as demonstrative reasoning but as personal opinion or whim. We accept contempt for historical precedents, which in our assurance about progress we accept as naive or corrupt aspects of an outworn past. We accept



judgments of the futility of reason giving weight instead to attitudes and interests and counting upon advertising and public relations operating in an atmosphere of conformity to produce consensus.

Abstract thought and the principles emerging from it can easily be dismissed as personal opinion or prejudice. If we turn from these uncertain foundations to the collection of data from experience or from history, we are troubled by the reflection that the selection and ordering of these data may be the result only of the particular attitudes or feelings or prejudices we entertain. Our attitudes and feelings, moreover, seem to be merely expressions of our early conditioning or of our special economic or social interests. In short, there seems to be no way in which anything generally conclusive can be grasped. What appears to be so, whether as a result of abstract thought or of application to experience, may be merely an accident of our emotional history or a product of our emotional state.

The processes of discussion, then, involve merely the exchange of opinion or the clash of prejudices and interests. Agreement, consensus, and concurrence in action can be achieved only by propaganda devices, and since the differences of propagandists cannot ultimately be resolved, agreement can be reached only by gaining control of the instruments of propaganda. The only ways to accomplish this is by super propaganda or physical violence.

Consequences of these developments are everywhere evident. They may be seen in the curricula of educational institutions. They are all too manifest in the behavior of political parties and of ambitious politicians. They deeply affect our religious life.

The state of mind I have been describing accounts, I believe, in large part for the confusion and anxiety of our times. Lacking confidence in the tradition of reasoned discourse on which our political institutions and, indeed, our whole way of life was founded, we view the future with uncertainty and foreboding.

If I am at all right in this analysis, the road to the recovery of



health, not only for America but for Western civilization, seems clear. We need to think as hard and deeply as we can. We need rigorous, systematic, and sustained discussion of the basic issues of our time. We need to clarify our general ideas, to arrange them systematically, and to eliminate as far as possible the contradictions we entertain. We need to study our traditions and re-examine history as carefully as we can. We may be confident, I believe, that hard and persistent thought will establish confidence in the products of reason and that full and free discussion will lead us step by step into at least approximations of truth about the nature of things. The truths which may emerge will surely be more than merely notional ideas. They will establish a fixed residence not only in the mind but in the soul, and so established will be inextricably connected with our emotions and our wills.

This road to recovery is not an easy one. It is stony and difficult and uphill. But it does lead upward. Granting that it will not be easy, I can only conclude by saying that the excellence of democracy is not that it is the easiest way of life, but that it is incomparably the best.