

A True Republic: The Principles of a Balanced American Government.

By Bradley Birzer, Ph.D.



The American Founders sought to establish a form of government that reflected the order inherent to a virtuous soul—a government ruled by reason and directed toward the goal of the common good which was passionately pursued by its citizens.

When the American Founders looked for examples of good government, they looked mostly to the ancient world. There, they focused on two classic republics: commercial Carthage and virtuous Rome. As a whole, the Founders tended to equate the British Empire with Carthage, and hence corruption, vice, and avarice. However, they recognized that a “Roman” republic might be impossible to achieve on earth. Thus, they sought some kind of balance between commerce and virtue. Through commerce, the average person could pursue his self-interest to the benefit of the entire community, while the virtuous and liberally-educated person could give of himself to the *res publica* (Latin for the common good) through culture, politics, and religious leadership. In these ways, the Founders hoped to create a functioning, free, and well-ordered society.

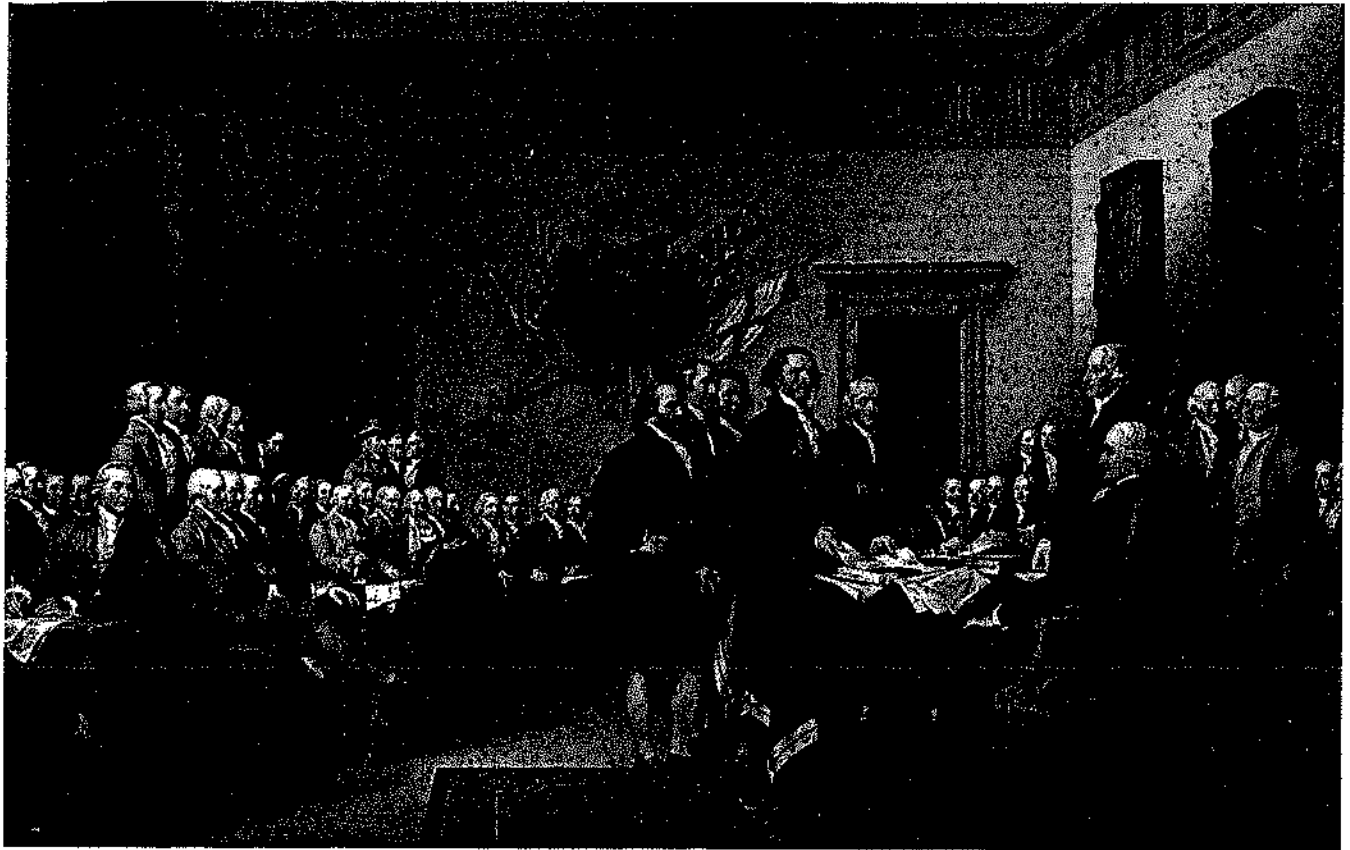


For the American Founders, four tenets defined a successful and well-functioning republic. First, the Founders believed that the entire society must be founded upon the virtue of a significant minority of citizens. The term “virtue” called

for the sacrifice of one’s immediate desires to the common good. The idea of a citizen’s virtue—*virtus*, in Latin, meaning “manliness” or “excellence”—was drawn from the seven virtues of the western tradition. Four of the virtues are gleaned from classical, pagan antiquity—prudence, justice, fortitude, and temperance—and three from Christianity—faith, hope, and charity.

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Second, republicans must be willing to defend the right to property as the central right of the human person. Our modern notion of property as the acquisition of material goods, however, was not the Founder’s understanding. The acquisition of material stuff and consequent prosperity were simply secondary benefits to securing property. The right to property, for the Founders, meant the right of one person to associate freely with another. That is, each person holds a fundamental, pre-political right to form an association with any other person or persons, unless the agreement has been created through fraudulent means. By securing the right to property, the Founders believed that through mutual agreement, persons could freely create a family, a school, or a business without political interference.



While we find the constitutional protection to these rights—assembly and petition—in the first amendment of the Bill of Rights, we find its most explicit statement in the Old Northwest Land Ordinance, passed unanimously by Congress on July 13, 1787, and reaffirmed by the first Congress under the U.S. Constitution. For years, it held the same weight as the Constitution. Article II of the Ordinance states: “And, in the just preservation of rights and property, it is understood and

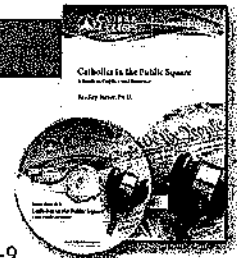
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declared, that no law ought ever to be made, or have force in the said territory, that shall, in any manner whatever, interfere with or affect private contracts or engagements, *bona fide*, and without fraud previously formed.”

Third, the Founders believed that a free society can be earned and secured only through the willingness of its citizens to bear arms in defense of family and community. No moment provides a greater example of this than the citizens of Lexington, Massachusetts, who after much consultation with the local Calvinist pastor and the village as a whole, chose to defend themselves in the earliest hours of April 19, 1775, despite being outnumbered by opposing British forces almost twenty to one. Finally, a republic—itsself a reflection of the natural law and the natural ordering of things—must balance the three natural forms of ruling: monarchy, aristocracy, and democracy. Monarchy, the rule of one, represents the desires of rationality; the aristocracy, the rule of the best, represents the longings of the soul; and democracy, the rule of the majority, represents the wishes of the passions. Only by transcending as well as tying these forms of government together, could a republic bring harmony and order to a people.

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