

2: The Philosophy of American Government

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Abraham Lincoln, in his address at Gettysburg on November 19, 1863, put into words the essence of what America stands for, “conceived in liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal.” In the midst of the Civil War, he spoke of the task ahead: “that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom – and that government of the people, by the people, and for the people shall not perish from the earth.” While the power to govern in America rests with the people, there is recognition that the nation and its leaders are responsible to a higher authority, that God has sovereignty over nations as well as individuals.

This acknowledgement of God distinguishes American democracy from the totally laicist philosophies of government that are prevalent in Europe. Freedom under God implies that the government has a moral basis, that God is the ultimate source of all authority, and that man is bound in his actions not only by the laws of the government, but by the strictures of the Creator.

France, in contrast, has organized its government solely on the basis of humanistic principles, treating man as autonomous and subject only to his own reasoning. In 1789,



Pope Benedict XVI

France adopted the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen, which contains no reference to a Higher Being. Rather, it states that, “Liberty consists in the freedom to do everything which injures no one else.” This is, to use the words of Pope Benedict XVI, anarchic freedom. A person has no constraints on his behavior, save only those that arise to prevent his infringement upon the same rights of others for similarly unrestrained actions. Liberty in France is akin to license, and not ordered or morally limited. The French

Constitution, last revised in 1958, avows adherence to the earlier Declaration, and states that France is a “secular” Republic. When God is omitted and made irrelevant to public life, statesmen are responsible only to the popular will of the people, and are immune for their actions from a superior judgment. If the state becomes tyrannical, as did Nazi Germany, the people have no appeal to a higher authority.

September 11, 2001 awakened this nation to the reality of terrorism on American shores. The public was frightened, angry, confused. War was declared on terrorism. This was a reaction to the immediate threat to assure survival, but was not a long-term or complete solution to the problem facing the nation. Even if terrorism was to be fully suppressed and the country’s borders made impenetrable to terrorists, conditions existing throughout the world would still give rise to other threats to the nation. Being against something, does not change the underlying conditions. There would still be countries headed by ambitious dictators anxious to extend their power. People would still live in oppression, being destitute, without legal rights or an expectation of economic or political improvement. An approach that would result in changes in the root causes of terrorism was needed.

President George W. Bush has said this nation is for democracy and will assist other nations achieve it. This is a laudable goal, but the question remains, how should the United States promote democracy in other nations? What actions should America take politically, economically, militarily, diplomatically to do so? What obligations, if any, does the United States have as the world's only superpower, and on what basis should it determine its role in the world? These questions have significant moral overtones, and can only be answered if there is a public consensus on what this country stands for, what principles are to underlie its policies and actions, what values it is to adhere to as a nation. These fundamental principles and values should be rooted in a higher authority, otherwise, relying only on the secular desires of the people, America can become as roughish as the nations it opposes. Hitler was successful because he decoupled the German people from their religious beliefs and substituted the view of Arian supremacy and a misguided patriotism for the teachings of the churches.

America from its founding has recognized its reliance on God. The Supreme Court affirmed this understanding when, in 1952, it asserted: "We are a religious people whose institutions presuppose a Supreme Being." As a result, the principles underlying the American philosophy of government are moral in nature. The duties and obligations they impose are moral duties and obligations. With the strong movement toward secularism that has occurred in America, the nation must reaffirm its understanding and commitment toward its founding principles, for they form the basis to set the nation's purposes, provide a framework for its domestic and foreign policies, lead to standards of conduct for its actions, and establish a basis for political dialogue. Without such an agreement, it will be difficult, if not impossible, to develop a consensus on how the nation should act as a society.

As Knights of Columbus, let us educate ourselves on the principles upon which this country was established (a worthwhile theme for our Lecturers to implement) and on the values we should practice as Catholic Americans, and then decide how, as a Council, we can take action to foster those principles and values in our community.