

# The Fading Legacy of 1776

An Essay  
by  
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## Introduction to the Electronic Version

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The intellectual growth of the individual in any society is controlled by his or her access to knowledge. Mankind has generally had ever increasing access to knowledge through the growth of science, but this flow of information from science to the individual is always filtered through the various lenses of society. Sometimes in our history the filters have been so light as to be virtually unnoticeable, and at other times this filtering has been so dark they have practically shut society off from scientific knowledge. To put it succinctly, our knowledge is limited by what science makes available for you to know and by what society allows you to know.

The most famous historical example of this is probably the conflict over whether the earth revolves around the sun or the sun revolves around the earth. Science clearly argued for the earth revolving around the sun, but the religious values in sway when Western culture was moving successfully out of the Dark Ages saw this bit of science as weakening the absoluteness of God and the general teachings of the Christian church about the God-man relationship. Religion ultimately lost this battle (thank you Copernicus and Galileo for standing tall), and as usual, the perceived conflict turned out to be more emotional than factual.

The most similar volatile issue of today is probably embryonic stem-cell research. Like everything else today, this problem is more complex than the one facing Copernicus. The issue follows a chain of rationalization from the creation of man by God in his image, to the sanctity of human life, to the defining instant when ordinary life becomes human life, to recognition of life elements having the potential to become human life, to any actions that might thwart potential human life elements from becoming such, etc. depending on which religious precept you wish to trace.

Regardless of a society's structure, the values of those in control of that society are adjunctive rules for living in that society. In a democracy this means that the largest subculture has the potential to impose its values on the rest of the subcultures making up the country. In the multi-racial, multi-ethnic, multi-religious society of the United States, this is a potential problem of enormous societal implication.

The United States of America was founded primarily on the principles of the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century European Enlightenment. While the majority of the framers of our constitution were, if not deeply religious, personalities formed by Christian religious beliefs, the workers and movers were not very religious at all (thank you Messrs, Jefferson and Franklin). Consequently, while the basic documents of our country are framed with religious rhetoric, they are founded on the principles of natural rights. While this concept carries its own metaphysical sense, it is not burdened with the dogma of organized religion. That is to say, our country is founded on principles of rationality and reason (thank you Messrs. Descartes, Leibniz, Hume, Rousseau, Smith, etc.) rather than specific sets of faith and dogma. For this rationality and reason to be self-perpetuating in our society, the framers also included a strong mandate for public education. The

Enlightenment, of which they were disciples, firmly believed that an educated electorate was paramount to establishing and maintaining an equitable society.

Since 1776 it has become increasingly clear (to at least some) that two cornerstones of equitability define the essence of our society, an essence that transcends the mere fact that our government is elected by a democratic method. The first (listed first only because it is a precondition for the second) is the fact that almost everyone has had access to a free public education. For most of U.S. history the basis for this education has been the same that grounded our Constitution—the body of scientific knowledge and the power of rational thought. This universally available public education provided a means for upward mobility particularly important in our capitalistic society and a means of minimizing the inevitable inequities of social stratification. But as this cornerstone has eroded over the last forty years, so too has the equitability of our increasingly stratified society.

The second cornerstone is the fact that our government has not functioned solely to the benefit of the majority that elected it, but that it has consistently governed in a manner that protected the rights of the minority that failed to elect the government. The United States has survived and prospered because it would not tolerate the imposition of the values of some on the lives of those that did not hold similar values, unless those values were specifically set forth in the founding documents.

History has lots of failed democratic experiments. These failures were usually because the group that came to power did just that, without regard for all the other people they were representing. Consequently, there is a brutal legacy in Western culture of popularly elected governments metamorphosing to authoritarian governments with the goals of increasing power and self-perpetuation for the ruling few.

This few thought they had the right to impose their values on everyone under their governmental control. In fact, they usually felt they had a moral or religious imperative to impose their values—to do so was to follow the will of the people, the will of nature, the will of God, or some other “will” rather than to act with rational thought. Thus civilization suffered the callous slavery of the Semitic tribes by Egypt, the “civilizing” of the barbarians by Alexander, the butchery of the crusades and inquisition by the early Catholic Church, and the insanity of World War Two inflicted by the Nazis.

Mankind has a lousy record, and we seem doomed to keep adding to it by repeating old mistakes. Today we might be talking about the morality of stem cell research, the loss of individual freedoms to protect us against terrorism, the advisability of the government subsidizing religious education, or the fairness of teaching our children both creationism and science. Tomorrow, we could be talking about no right-of-choice to abortion for any reason, no tolerance for homosexuality, no rights to privacy if the government feels it needs to know, educational opportunity tailored to social and financial status, and the pursuit and dissemination of scientific knowledge only when it agrees with the majority held religious belief.

Alarmist rhetoric? Maybe, but all too frighteningly possible if we continue on our current course of increasing political polarization, erosion of individual liberties, and imposition of the religious values of a few on everyone. And the most frightening thing of all is that we are moving in this direction because it is the will of God (in this country) or the will of Allah (in the Islamic countries). We've been here before. Whether you couch your position as wanting to bring the benefits of democracy to the oppressed or wanting to bring the word of the True God to the infidels, it is simply the imposition of the values of one group on another group.

Values are personal and may be totally divorced from governments, societies, and religions, but few bother to do so because it requires a great deal of intellectual energy. Most of us are content to stay in the ruts of indoctrination we received in early childhood rather than face the difficult transitions that maturity finally offers us. We arrive at these potential transitions when we have expanded our knowledge of the universe to a point of criticality, a point where the accumulation of knowledge is such that we can start a chain reaction that will free ourselves from the tyranny of adolescent conditioning and provide a means whereby we may define ourselves through the application of reason.

We cannot begin this journey without knowledge, and we cannot gain knowledge in a society that denies science. While we haven't denied science in America—yet, we have taken the first step in doing so by substituting non-rational thought for the rational thought of our forefathers, by substituting the pseudo-science of creationism for the science of evolution. Who could ever have believed that a single social group, whether minority or majority, no matter how organized, determined, or vocal could so severely erode the basic principles of this country that we are faced once again with the Scopes' trial almost forty years after putting a man on the moon.

Democracy in one form or another seems to provide a reasonable governmental structure in which freedom can flourish. However, it is really just the icing on the cake, since freedom can exist under other governmental forms as well. It is freedom that is the cake itself—both physical and intellectual freedom.

For a government to provide freedom it must provide a society without tyranny. Such tyranny is easy to spot when it takes overt and physical forms like search and seizure of personal property, suspension of the rule of law, or the restriction of public information. It is less visible when it takes the forms of social injustice like racial, ethnic, and gender bias, or when it passes laws that perpetuate economic and social inequality. It is almost invisible when it takes the form of misapplying the governmental principal of "the greater good" to moral and ethical values.

Nevertheless, it is tyranny. When the power of government is wielded by ethnic, religious, or social groups in such a manner as to deny personal liberty, choice of values, and the pursuit of their definition of happiness to other groups under the aegis of that government, it is tyranny. When one government seeks to impose its values on a group or government not under its voluntary aegis, it is

tyranny. No matter what ethical or moral high-ground the imposing group might feel it possesses, it is tyranny. It is a terrorism of values.