

The Good Citizen

by

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At the center of the town square of the Ville de Tréguier in western France stands a monument to Ernst Renan, who wrote the famous 19th century classic, *Vie de Jesus*. Renan was born and lived in Tréguier, and his descendants sustain his memory as an important luminary, the best of Tréguier's citizens.

Since the heart of the teaching in *Vie de Jesus* is that the story of Christ possesses historical veridity precisely in its human dimensions and not otherwise, we might say that Citizen Renan built himself up by tearing down the Son of God. To be fair to Renan, I must acknowledge that he counseled against a rationalism that "wishes to govern the world without regard to the religious needs of the soul."¹ On the other side, though, one must acknowledge that there is no acceptable equivocation on the question of divinity. A consequence of Renan's teaching was to contribute to what Chesterton called the "smashing of universal laws."²

I wonder why it so often seems that good, notable citizenship thrives upon eroding conceded moral principles rather than upon reinforcing them? I think here of Martin Diamond's frequent discussions of the need for a "civil religion" in a regime of "low but solid virtues," that is, a regime in which real religion is no longer relevant. This is what lies behind the questions I have posed, What is the good citizen? How are we to recognize him today? May we recognize the good man within the good citizen? And, how are we to generate, regenerate, and sustain good citizens? The answers to these questions may prove elusive, but I am quite certain of the starting point: the good citizen is at least the mature human, one who is ready to "digest the doctrine of righteousness" instead of living on "milk." As the apostle said, these are "men with minds trained by practice to distinguish between good and bad."³

Our culture faces no questions more important than these, and I thank you for the opportunity to reflect upon them with you. Nor are these questions important only for those who live in the United States. As a passion for democracy, in a variety of guises, moves the hearts of peoples across the globe and as many nations struggle to establish democratic states, the question of how to recognize and form the good citizen concerns thoughtful individuals world-wide.

But surely we already know the answers to these questions, some may say, offering as proof our country's successful history of two and a quarter centuries as a democratic republic. They might point to the fall of the Berlin wall, the defeat of the Soviet Union, and even the recent ousting of Slobodan Milosevic as evidence of the triumph of democracy, secure in their confidence that democracy forms good citizens and that democracy flourishes across the planet.

Others, however – and perhaps many here today – may share my doubt about just exactly *what* it is that is spreading so vigorously in the global society of the twenty-first century. Has republicanism vanquished totalitarianism, or is it perhaps rather the case that one economic system has proven a better road to prosperity than another, leaving largely unexamined questions about the fundamental spring, the way of life, that moves and unites a republic?

History's dodo germinates future failures in the euphoric celebration of recent triumphs. Thus did Athens squander in Syracuse what she won in Greece. Thus did Rome despoil at home what she had gained in Carthage and Europe. Thus did American statesmen welcome the greatest military victory in human history – the victory of the United States over the Soviet Union – with the invocation of a New World Order predicated upon economic determinism: free markets make free men. The special insouciance of this blind reliance upon capitalism is its notable failure to recognize the opportunity to convert a merely military victory into a moral triumph. The world, therefore, joined the United States in easy assumption that the fall of Soviet-directed communism and parties of the left in Europe, Africa, and Latin America had disproved rather than merely disapproved of socialism. No one paused to inquire whether the soul of socialism had crept so nearly into the core of western liberal democracies, including the United States, that only the parasite's host had fallen, while the parasite had successfully migrated to fatter kine.⁴

What is this parasite? There are many ways that we might describe the corruption that lay at the heart of the Marxist regimes, but perhaps the most invidious aspect of Marx's doctrine of historical materialism was its categorical refutation of the possibility of the *res publica* – that is, the reality of a true public and common good in any of the arenas in which we traditionally observe politics. Marx wrote emphatically of the impossibility of community in general for all men who had lived until the time he wrote and for most if not all who would ever live. What made community in general impossible, in his analysis, is the view that what might be taken as the differentiated dynamics of a single community constitute rather the inveterate antagonisms of true enemies and not potential friends. The description of politics in Marx is a description of continuous warfare, where the terms “classes” or “social orders” replace the terms “armies” and “command and control.”⁵

If we substitute the term, “social groups” for “social orders,” I think we can readily acknowledge that neither the capitalist nor the Marxist economic system has been able to create and sustain true peace and unity along with prosperity. Here in the U.S., and elsewhere throughout the world, an active struggle among groups continues to characterize much of the social and political dynamic. To the ages-old struggle among the classes,

we have added a myriad of new groups that insist on separateness, thereby fostering strife, and in great measure placing the particular interests of a given group over the general, public good.

Nowhere is group membership more pronounced or more promoted than on our college campuses, where the mantra of multiculturalism continues to be invoked in the name of tolerance, enlightenment, and virtue. Student unions at campuses throughout the country accrue new associations based on group membership the way ships accrue barnacles. It no longer suffices to support a black student alliance, or a center for Hispanic students; universities must create centers for groups of every nationality, ethnicity, race, religious belief, and sexual orientation. In the headlong rush to enunciate and celebrate the traditions, preferences, and so-called rights of these many group affiliations, we lose sight of transcendent human rights, shared needs, and the common good. We begin to deny even the possibility of the *res publica*, a denial to which no milk-water civil religion could ever constitute an adequate response.

These ever-proliferating groups are only a modified and disguised version of historical classes. But what matters is that they have become the motive force of the new equality, an equality rather relative than moral, and which, above all, focuses on the problem of race.

Contemporary pluralism in the United States differs profoundly from the first ideas of social organization that prevailed during the founding era. The original organization prescribed a political process meant to “harmonize, assimilate, and protect” the diverse interests or parties, which constituted at least the thirteen member states of the American confederation before 1789. That is, the founders strove to make one people out of many peoples (*e pluribus unum*). Therefore, the constitutional institutions were the appropriate response to the plurality of views and ends to the exact extent that the Constitution wished to coordinate them in some common view. In effect, a dynamic society passed through several stages to the end of attaining ultimate unity. Pluralism is one of these stages. For the Americans, it was the authors of *The Federalist* who had elaborated most fully the idea of unity in a free and republican nation – the last stage of political development in a dynamic society.

Contemporary pluralism, by contrast, values social differences and turns these differences into forces hostile to the development of ultimate unity – into forces that foment perpetual warfare and conflict.⁶

If this presence of warfare and conflict, this persisting invasion by a parasite that feeds on envy and resentment and refutes the possibility of attaining the *res publica*, this fostering of group rights over individual rights – if these are all signs that we are not generating and sustaining a good citizenry today, then we ought consider whether we have ever done so. Is the good citizen but a phantasm, an ideal toward which we may direct our hopes and aspirations with no expectation that we would ever fully realize this ideal?

I think that there have been brief moments in the history of the United States when good citizens have been generated and sustained. The chief such occasion was at the time of the founding of the nation. I know of no better way for us to seek to understand what the good citizen is and to learn how to generate good citizens than by studying the writings of the founders, particularly *The Federalist Papers*.

The founders faced a number of conundrums even more challenging to the formation of the nation than the military might of the British empire, which they had successfully overthrown. For while it had long been thought that the good polity formed good citizens, many of the founders – most notably Washington – understood that it is equally and perhaps more true that good men form the good regime. It is a free people that that make this a free government and not the reverse. But where do we get a free people that will make the government free?⁷ Washington was convinced that the foundation of a good polity was the preference for justice over patriotism for souls forced to choose. He was, I think, correct; it is justice that vindicates patriotism, rather than patriotism that produces justice.⁸

The genius of the founders was their ability to foster out of the diverse interests of thirteen colonies a palpable sense of, and commitment to, a common good, a shared interest, a holding the same things near and dear, sufficient to create a new nation. The founders needed to form the good citizens at the same time that they sought to form an entirely new regime – one in which the people would be fully and at all times self-governing. The undertaking was all the more arduous, all the more daunting for the founders' clear sense that the success or failure of their endeavor would be regarded by the world not merely as the outcome of an experiment by one group of men at one point in time, but a real and significant test of whether such a regime were ever possible. You know what Publius wrote in the first paper: "It has frequently been remarked, that it seems to have been reserved to the people of this country, by their conduct and example, to decide the important question, whether societies of men are really capable or not, of establishing good government from reflection and choice, or whether they are forever destined to depend for the political constitutions, on accident and force."⁹

In order to create a new constitution, a new way of life, the citizens needed to make a decision, a choice, that would be far more likely to be made by a citizenry already knitted together by a shared way of life than by the citizens of the confederated states, so cognizant of their diversity and so zealous in guarding their liberty, which so many of them defined largely in terms of freedom from government restraints. How were the founders able to accomplish this feat?

A comprehensive answer to this question would take more than the space of these brief remarks. It might, in fact, require a series of lectures, such as those that I delivered to teachers in Louisiana and recapitulated in my book, *The Federalist Papers: A Commentary*. Today, I want only to touch on what I think were the three overarching means that the Federalists used to generate the good citizens, whom they expected (once constituted as a citizenry) to approve a constitution that would then affirm, formalize, and guide them as a nation. Those means were:

- A clear and shared conception of what it would mean to be a good citizen in a democratic republic;
- A stubborn conviction that imperfect men could and would form a more perfect union; and,
- A consistent effort to encourage a fledgling people to pray to the same Solomon.

Montesquieu – a philosopher whose writings influenced both the Federalists and the Anti-federalists – correctly tells us that “virtue” is the principle of republican government. He writes in Book 4, chapter 5 of *The Spirit of the Laws*: “One can define this virtue as love of the laws and the fatherland. This love, requiring a continuous preference of the public interest over one’s own, gives all the individual virtues; they are only that preference.”¹⁰ In his foreword to the 1757 edition, he added this statement about his use of the term, “virtue:”

For the intelligence of the first four books of this work, it is necessary to observe that what I call *virtue* in the republic is love of the fatherland, that is to say, love of equality. It is neither a moral virtue nor a Christian virtue; it is *political virtue* . . . the good man that is the question in Book 3, chapter 5, is not the Christian good man, but the political good man . . . It is the man who loves the laws of his country and who acts from love of the laws of his country.¹¹

While I believe that Montesquieu is accurate in naming virtue as the principle of a republican regime, I think he errs – or is perhaps disingenuous – in distinguishing political virtue from moral virtue. My argument today is that they are, in fact, inseparable if not identical. Moreover, it appears that the founders to significant extent treated political and moral virtue as one and the same. The good citizen *is* the good man.

This daring affirmation surprises souls accustomed to regard democracy as a compromise with merit and good faith. That perspective, however, fails to engage the conversation at the point from which the founders set out; namely, the conviction that “private morality” is the “foundation of national happiness,” to quote Washington.¹² It would be easy to cull from Washington’s corpus an entire argument to demonstrate that this conviction is the foundation of the confidence in public opinion expressed most consummately in the *Farewell Address*. From his ready assimilation of “the distinguished character of a Patriot” to the “distinguished character of a Christian”¹³ in orders given at Valley Forge, to the carefully developed invitation to his fellow citizens to “imitate the Divine Author of our religion” early in the founding,¹⁴ to the argument advanced to Presbyterians that “the general prevalence of piety, philanthropy, honesty, industry, and economy” is “particularly necessary for advancing and confirming the happiness” of the country, to the first inaugural address, to his concluding insistence that “religion and morality are the indispensable supports, . . . the firmest props of the duties of Men and Citizens, one observes Washington developing an argument that responds to the dramatic

question he posed in the *Farewell*. “Can it be that Providence has not connected the permanent felicity of a Nation with its Virtue?”

In sum, the founding depended upon goodness (which is not to say perfection) in men to vindicate the founding itself. On the strength of that foundation they could entrust to public opinion judgments upon which the fundamental justice of the society would rest. They were certain: if folly were not to rule in the democratic republic, it was not because ordinary human beings were immune to folly; it were rather because ordinary human beings with solid moral foundations were aided in resisting folly. What aided them? Their habits and their God!

Why is this so? We can begin to answer this question by considering another: Why is it that the idea of United States citizenship, without regard to community or national origins, is intuitive to human beings around the world?

The answer, I believe, is that American citizenship is defined strictly in terms of those human characteristics and circumstances that manifestly apply to all human beings. Because those terms, as suggested in the Declaration of Independence, invoke human interests and ambitions as the basis of membership in a good polity, it follows that wherever persons hope for the fulfillments to which their individual interests and ambitions aspire, they will naturally regard themselves as capable of American citizenship. This premise is the *novus ordo seclorum*, a world in which persons can imagine “marrying themselves abroad” without conceiving that to do so entails abandoning their dearest attachments. When Aristotle identified intermarriage as the fundamental condition for unity in the polis, he pointed beyond the immediate relationships among individuals to the realms of human imagination. In that realm, what counts is the good that one can imagine for oneself. Whatever offers that prospect automatically becomes the standard of individual decency and fulfillment.

By holding out such a promise, the United States and every similarly constituted republic make a commitment beyond the limits of its own territory. That commitment is to recognize and reward to the extent practicable the aspirations of human beings who find in this promise cause for virtuous exertion. It is that condition of modernity which chiefly distinguishes it from the ancient world. One recalls Juba patterning himself upon the noble Cato.¹⁵ It might be thought that Juba wished to be Roman; in fact, he wished only to be supremely human. What is new is the ability persons now have to draw such inspiration from the idea of citizenship in a free republic. It is a paradox of considerable complexity that what is held out to every human being willy-nilly can still hold forth the prospect of excellence. There are many thoughtful critics who deny such a possibility *a priori*. They do so, in my view, in ignorance of the precise character of modern citizenship, which hinges on the affirmation of the people’s capacity for rule despite long-standing doubts.¹⁶

The Federalists were well aware of the long-standing doubts about the capacity of any people, anywhere to be fully self-governing at all times. Yet, in the face of these doubts and in full awareness that men are not angels, they firmly asserted their conviction

that such a government could and would be formed. Why is it that while acknowledging that the people are imperfect and that their government is not able to make them virtuous and wise, the Federalists nevertheless maintained that it would be wise and virtuous to construct such a government?

The argument, reduced to its sparsest terms, is that such a people rightly constituted would be persistently just –and improved by their justice.

The third and final mechanism that the Federalists used to generate good citizens is one that I have already touched on in these remarks – their consistent efforts to induce the fledging American people to pray to the same Solomon. The essential task, at the founding, was to create a people who can be called properly a people, who are sufficiently homogenous, sharing the same moral and political principles and therefore able to work on the world stage as a single people, rather than a heterogeneous collection of peoples with differing interests. Publius made it very clear that any attempt to build a common life on the strength of differences rather than the strength of similarities would fall prey ultimately to warfare. There is no middle ground on which we can preserve differences and still at the same time expect peace to prevail. Aware of human ambition and the inclination to put self-interest above the public good, the founders sought to insulate this characteristic in human beings by teaching some set of human beings to hold the same things “near and dear.”

The founders’ efforts to teach the people to pray to the same Solomon were, I think, made a bit easier by the fact that all – or virtually all – the people already believed in prayer and in the power of religion to stabilize a nation. Too many people today, both in and outside elected office, believe that our country’s promise of religious freedom means freedom *from* religion. It was not always so. Tocqueville, that keen analyst of the spring of the American way of life in the early and mid 19th century, wrote:

Every American I meet, whether in his country or elsewhere, I ask whether he believes that religion is useful for the stability of the laws and the good order of society. Without hesitating he responds that a civilized society, and above all a free society, cannot survive without religion. Respect for religion, in his eyes, is the greatest guarantee of the state’s stability and the safety of individuals. The person least instructed in the science of government knows that much.¹⁷

My point, here, is partly to remind us that a people must share a belief in principles of relationship independent of politics in order to make liberal democracy work. If one tries to make politics the totality of the human experience and organizes politics on the grounds of liberal democracy, one will produce moral chaos. One will leave people who require social and moral guidance without any restraint or guidance. They will see politics as the only instrument suited to the pursuit of desire or ambition. They will turn all of their relationships and their differences into moments of political contest and struggle. Furthermore, without these sorts of underlying principles, democracy’s inherent potential for corruption is left to develop unchecked, setting into motion leveling in-

fluences that destroy the respect that human beings have for particular excellences. Thus, it leaves human beings with nothing more to motivate their conduct than their own self-concern, which expresses itself most powerfully in envy and resentment at all superior endowments. Without some sort of underlying principles apart from politics, democracies tend toward a flattening out of social distinction simultaneous with a heightening of “every the least difference among men.”¹⁸

What set or sets of principles can adequately and reliably serve as the moral foundation for liberal democracy? It may be that there are multiple possible answers to this question, and I invite you to suggest some. But for me – and I think for the founders of our nation – there is no set of principles that could serve this purpose more fully than those of Christianity, which is to say the God of Israel become God of all. And so, my point is mainly to suggest that one of the best ways that we as a nation might improve our work of generating, regenerating, and maintaining the good citizen is by making greater and better use of the tools of religion to form the good man. It will be interesting to observe whether the politicians who were willing, during the presidential campaign, to affirm the centrality of religion to the American nation will become the leaders able to demonstrate that conviction in how they govern.

Nor does it take much reflection to determine how this needs be done, for there is no more compelling argument than the life of Jesus. Renan to the contrary notwithstanding, I cannot conceive anyone attentively listening to that story and not being convicted that God strode among men and for their benefit, their salvation. Nor is the evidence that of miracles, apart from the miracle of the incarnation. It is far rather the very words, the claims, and deeds of Christ that recommend him to our understanding beyond our ability to understand. That is the sense in which the believer, seeking help to remain steadfast and told to believe, could reply, “Lord, I believe; help thou my unbelief.”

Everyone here today knows that if we can but be certain of the end toward which we aim, we necessarily increase the odds that we will attain that end. And so, I will end these remarks by simply noting that the good man and the good citizen each seek a common end, which is justice. Political philosophers from Socrates to Strauss have focussed on the question of justice – how to define it, how to recognize it, how to create and sustain it. I find compelling answers to this question in two works to which I return again and again – *The Federalist Papers* and the *Bible*. I will give the authors of these two works the last word this afternoon and invite you to hear the similarity in the messages:

Madison offers us inspiration and guidance with these words: “Justice is the end of government. It is the end of civil society. It ever has been and ever will be pursued until it be obtained, or until liberty be lost in the pursuit.”¹⁹

We may expect that Madison did not stray far from Washington’s teaching in this paean to justice, a teaching that tied man’s justice to God’s will. When Washington resigned in 1783 he had already made it clear that he aimed to continue the effort to found a unified nation that could secure its “national character” into a remote futurity.

Thus, it would not suffice for him to rule merely in his person. In phrasing his final prayer for his countrymen from *Micah* 6:8, so amended as to embrace the most extensive human ambition, Washington projected the goal he aimed at:

That [God] would most graciously be pleased to dispose us all, to do justice, to love mercy, and to demean ourselves with that Charity, humility and pacific temper of mind, which were the characteristicks of the Divine author of our blessed Religion, and without an humble imitation of whose example in these things, we can never hope to be a happy nation.²⁰

Washington's *imitatio dei* converts Micah's humble prayer ("What does God ask of man, but to do justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God?") into an ambitious program to shape a world-historical people.

¹ Cited by David Hartman, in "Whence Came the Transcendents," *Liberty: Man's Highest Political End; Graduate Essays on the Importance of Religion to a Free and Virtuous Society*, the 1993 Lord Acton Essay Competition, The Acton Institute, Grand Rapids, MI, p.43.

² *Ibid.*, Collette Flood, in "True and False Freedom," p. 22.

³ *Hebrews*, 6:13-14.

⁴ Allen, W.B., *The Federalist Papers: A Commentary*. New York: Peter Lang, 2000.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ Allen, W.B. "Equality and Right in the Contemporary World," *The Good Society: A PEGS Journal*, vol. 9 no. 1, 1999, pp. 84-89.

⁷ *The Federalist Papers: A Commentary*.

⁸ Allen, W.B. "The Truth About Citizenship: An Outline." *Cardozo Journal of International and Comparative Law*. vol. 4, 1996.

⁹ *The Federalist Papers*, no. 1.

¹⁰ Montesquieu, Charles de Secondat, baron de, *De l'esprit des lois*, (Paris: Édition Garnier Frères, 1973). Book 4, chapter 5. Translated by Carol Allen.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, Foreword.

¹² First Inaugural.

¹³ "General Orders," May 2, 1778, delivered at Valley Forge: Washington instructed his officers to attend religious worship.

¹⁴ "Circular Address to the Governors of the Thirteen States," June 14, 1783, in W. B. Allen, *George Washington: A Collection* (Indianapolis, IN: Liberty Press, Inc., 1988 [2d printing, 1991]).

¹⁵ See Addison, Cato.

¹⁶ "The Truth about Citizenship."

¹⁷ Alexis de Tocqueville *L'ancien régime et la révolution*, (Paris: Gallimard, 1967), ed. J. P. Mayer, Liv. III, ch. 1. P. 248

¹⁸ *The Federalist Papers: A Commentary* (citing John Locke, *The Second Treatise Concerning Civil Government*, p. 21).

¹⁹ *The Federalist* no. 51 at 358 (James Madison) (Benjamin Fletcher Wright ed., 1974).

²⁰ Cf., "Circular Address."