

Becoming an American

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VIII.

IN THIS LETTER I shall give you certain fundamental ideas of government which very gradually and very naturally grew out of the long struggle between the king of England and his people and which became the foundation stones in the government of America as built by the Constitutional Convention in 1787. In considering these ideas, we must bear in mind that during that long contest the question of methods of government was more often talked about by thinking people of England and her colonies than any other subject. Hence the writers of the time naturally put these commonly-expressed thoughts on political matters into writing. There were many of these writers, among the greatest of whom were Francis Bacon, John Milton, John Locke and Thomas Paine. These men belong to different ages, yet we find very great similarity in their arguments against the autocratic and aristocratic governments of England and other European countries. The colonists of America, being in the main English people and being deeply interested in English political affairs, read these writings and were tremendously influenced in their political thinking by them. Consequently, when they later had the opportunity to build a nation for themselves, they based it upon these fundamental ideas.

And what were these theories of government? One was the theory of natural rights. It was claimed by the proponents of this theory that man in the savage state had no government, that he lived, as do wild animals, in a state of nature, and that he possessed naturally certain rights, such as the right to live, the right to his liberty, the right to the ownership of property, such as skins, shelter and weapons, which he might have obtained thru his own labor, and the right to seek for happiness and comfort as he pleased. These writers argued, furthermore, that his exercise of these rights, particularly of the last, always caused conflict. For example, men in seeking their pleasure naturally came into competition with other men seeking the same end and a fight ensued. Hence these seekers after happiness found suffering instead. Gradually there grew up the feeling that some sort of agreement as to territory and privileges was necessary and in this feeling we have the germs of the first government. In response to this desire, these savage men came together and perfected what we call a social contract, a simple form of government. Altho historians do not acknowledge this supposed procedure as necessarily correct, the idea of the formation of government first by a simple social contract did influence the colonists' political thinking and did become one of the foundation stones of our government.

A third fundamental idea was that of popular sovereignty; that is, that all government rests upon the consent of the governed. This is the natural outgrowth of the social contract theory of government. As government was first formed by a contract of all members of the tribe, so its continuance and change should depend absolutely upon the consent of all those who enjoy its benefits. The people, then, are sovereign and they, not the officers of the government, are the rulers.

Government, as has been said before, is but the dress the clothing of the country, and may be altered or doffed as the people wish. Closely allied to this idea is that of majority rule, a fundamental idea of great importance in America. By this we mean that a majority of the people, they being sovereign in their power, may change the government whenever they deem such change best. No idea of government is more jealously guarded in America and rightfully so. There is not one of us who is not, now and then, keenly disappointed in the result of an election; yet, if we are good citizens, we yield gracefully and cheerfully and go on about our business. We have heard the voice of the people and we, as good citizens, obey. We know that that voice can be changed only thru changing the beliefs of a majority of the people; there is nothing more that we can do than to obey and, if we feel strongly enough about it, to undertake the task of bringing a majority of our fellow citizens over to our way of thinking. A refusal to obey the mandates of a majority of our fellow citizens is disloyal and un-American.

The fourth fundamental idea is that of the right to revolt. By this we mean that it is the privilege and duty of the citizens of America, whenever a majority feel that the government has become bad, to remove the officers or possibly to change the government. This does not necessarily mean armed revolt, altho it is possible that the occasion might arise for the use of arms. Our Constitution provides means for peaceably altering or abolishing the government by vote of the people or by vote of a majority of the state legislative bodies. This process is what we call amending the Constitution, a right upon which no limitation is placed. That is, if any citizen should propose an amendment to the national Constitution, abolishing wholly our government and putting in its place a kingdom, and this amendment should be legally adopted in the manner provided for in the Constitution, it would become law and our government would become a kingdom instead of a republic. This provision secures to us the power to destroy misrule and does away with the necessity of armed revolt. It is true, if some president were to use his very great power as commander of the army and navy to establish himself as dictator, and should thus overturn our government as at present organized, American citizens have the right to use arms to destroy his power. This, however, has never happened and probably never will happen. Hence I wish to emphasize that the right of revolt means merely the right of a majority of the American people to destroy misrule by removing bad rulers from office and changing laws thru the use of the franchise and not thru use of military force except in very extreme cases.

A fifth fundamental American idea is that which we call individualism. By the individualist, government is regarded as a sort of necessary evil of which the less there is, the better. To understand why this is one of America's foundation principles, we must recall the conditions which generally prevailed in Europe during the last half of the eighteenth century. All governments were monarchies in which the ruling power was vested in a small group of nobles and rich

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