

Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press, or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances.

“I never considered a difference of opinion in politics, in religion, in philosophy, as cause for withdrawing from a friend.” — Thomas Jefferson (1800)

## The Birth of Modern Liberalism

**(Editor’s Note: Viewpoint submissions on this and other topics are always welcome as part of our goal to encourage community discussion and exchange of perspectives.)**

Values that later grew into liberalism began stirring in the epoch now known as The Enlightenment, starting more than three centuries ago, chiefly in England and France. It was an era when kings still ruled brutally by “divine right,” and the church still sought to execute “heretics” holding irregular beliefs, or jail skeptics for blasphemy. Most people were agricultural serfs, working on lands inherited by wealthy barons and counts. The bottom-rung majority had virtually no rights.

But The Enlightenment roused a new way of thinking: a sense that all people should have some control over their lives, a voice in their own destiny. Absolute power of authorities — either the throne or the cathedral — was challenged. Reformers asserted that human reason and the scientific method can improve society and benefit nearly everyone.

The 1600s were a time of ugly intolerance, much of it stemming from alliances between church and throne. In England’s notorious Star Chamber, controlled by the Anglican archbishop, Puritan and Presbyterian dissenters were forced to testify against themselves, then sentenced to have their ears cut off or their faces branded with markings such as S.L. (for seditious libeler). One victim, John Lilburne, became a public hero because he wrote pamphlets claiming that all people deserved “freeborn rights” not subject to king or church.

Europe was emerging from horrors of religious wars and massacres between Catholics and Protestants. Catholic France persecuted Huguenot Protestants. Jews were attacked cruelly and banned from certain nations, including England. Sporadic executions of “heretics” and “witches” still occurred. England’s last accused witch was put to death in 1684. A few others were executed around Europe and the New World for another century.

This was the background that helped spawn Enlightenment reform.

England was shattered by civil war in the 1640s between Parliament and Puritans on one side versus King Charles I and Anglicans on the other. Charles was beheaded and the power of kings was reduced — expanding an erosion that began four centuries earlier when barons forced King John to sign the Magna Carta, yielding certain rights.

By the late 1600s, some think-

ers began pondering society and government:

Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679) wrote Leviathan asserting that people need a “social contract” to secure safe lives. In a dog-eat-dog natural state, he said, everyone suffers from “continual fear and danger of violent death; and the life of man [is] solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short.” Therefore, he said, people must yield power to a sovereign gov-

### GUEST VIEWPOINT

By James A. Haught

Editor Emeritus of The Charleston Gazette-Mail

ernment to enforce order and protect them. Hobbes supported a king as the sovereign — but the tide away from absolute kings already was flowing. Hobbes raised awareness that the social order is made by humans, not by God.

In his many writings, Hobbes repeatedly affronted the clergy. A bishop accused him of atheism, possibly punishable by death. The allegation subsided, then flared again. Nearing 80, Hobbes hastily burned some of his papers and eluded prosecution.

John Locke (1632-1704) hatched notions of democracy, arguing that all people, male and female, deserve a degree of equality. He dismissed the divine right of kings, and advocated separation of church and state to avert religious conflict.

John Milton (1608-1674) was more than an epic poet who wrote in four languages. He also supported popular government and attacked state-mandated religion. When Parliament imposed censorship on writings, he defied a licensing requirement and published an Areopagitica pamphlet claiming that all thinking people are entitled to free expression of their beliefs.

“Books are not absolutely dead things,” he said. “He who destroys a good book kills reason itself.” The principle of free speech and free press was furthered.

In France, Baron de Montesquieu (1689-1755) championed democracy and envisioned an elected government with power divided between executive, legislative and judicial branches.

Francois Marie Arouet (1694-1788) — “that consuming fire called Voltaire,” as Will Durant called him — was a brilliant French writer who became a heroic champion of human rights. Endlessly, he denounced cruelties of bishops and aristocrats. Here’s an example:

In the devout town of Abbeville, a teen-age youth, Francois de la Barre, was accused of marring a crucifix, singing impious songs and wearing his hat while

a church procession passed. He was sentenced to have his tongue torn out, his head chopped off, and his remains burned. Voltaire wrote bitter protests against this savagery. He helped appeal the youth’s case to Parliament, which showed “mercy” by affording the blasphemer a quick death by beheading — with a copy of Voltaire’s Philosophical Dictionary nailed to his body.

Voltaire’s protest writings roused ferment across Europe and won reversal of a few cases. He freed Jean Espinas, who had spent 23 years aboard a penal galley ship because he sheltered a fugitive Protestant minister for one night. Likewise, he freed Claude Chaumont from a galley bench, where he had been sentenced for attending a Protestant worship service.

In The Rights of Man, Thomas Paine wrote that Voltaire’s “forte lay in exposing and ridiculing the superstitions which priestcraft, united with statecraft, had interwoven with governments.”

At first, Enlightenment ideas were somewhat suppressed in Europe, where kings and archbishops still prevailed, but they found fertile ground in America’s colonies. Brilliant radicals such as Thomas Jefferson, John Adams, Benjamin Franklin and James Madison read them ardently and adopted them as a pattern for the first modern democracy, the United States of America. In the Declaration of Independence, Jefferson summed up the essence:

“All men are created equal and endowed by their creator with certain inalienable rights, among these life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.”

Less-known founding father George Mason incorporated the principles into the Bill of Rights, keeping church and state apart, guaranteeing free speech, and protecting each person from abuses by the majority. Similarly, the personal liberties were reiterated in the Rights of Man and the Citizen adopted by the French Revolution, and eventually in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights that Eleanor Roosevelt helped craft for the United Nations.

Thus democracy became self-contradictory. A basic premise is majority rule — yet a bill of rights prevents majority rule. For example, the Christian majority cannot vote to banish minority Jews or skeptics. Personal beliefs are exempt from majority rule.

The Enlightenment was the seedbed that sprouted most of the liberal freedoms now enjoyed in democracies everywhere. It projected a model for humane, safe, fair modern life.

Children could return to school to learn, be with friends, do sports and not worry about getting sick or dying, so do it for them!

Working together, we can rid our town of this virus. Let’s do it!

—Patsy Couturier  
Cottage Grove

### Letters to the Editor Policy

The Sentinel welcomes letters to the editor as part of a community discussion of issues on the local, state and national level.

Emailed letters are preferred. Handwritten or typed letters must be signed. All letters need to include full name, address and phone number; only name and city will be printed. Letters should be limited to about 300 words. Letters are subject to editing for length, grammar and clarity. Publication of any letter is not guaranteed and depends on space available and the volume of letters received.

Letters that are anonymous, libelous, argumentative, sarcastic or contain accusations that are unsourced or without documentation will not be published.

Letters containing poetry or from outside The Sentinel readership area will only be published at the discretion of the editor.

### Political/Election Letters:

Election-related letters must address pertinent or timely issues of interest to our readers at-large.

Letters must: 1) Not be a part of letter-writing campaigns on behalf of (or by) candidates; 2) Ensure any information about a candidate is accurate, fair and not from second-hand knowledge or hearsay; and 3) explain the reasons to support candidates based on personal experience and perspective rather than partisanship and campaign-style rhetoric.

Candidates themselves may not use the letters to the editor column to outline their views and platforms or to ask for votes; this constitutes paid political advertising.

As with all letters and advertising content, the newspaper, at the sole discretion of the publisher, general manager and editor, reserves the right to reject any letter that doesn’t follow the above criteria.

### Send letters to:

[dsherwood@cgsentinel.com](mailto:dsherwood@cgsentinel.com)

## HOW TO CONTACT YOUR REPS

### Oregon state representatives

- **Sen. Floyd Prozanski**  
District 4 State Senator  
PO Box 11511  
Eugene, Ore. 97440  
Phone: 541-342-2447  
Email: [sen.floydprozanski@state.or.us](mailto:sen.floydprozanski@state.or.us)
- **Rep. Cedric Hayden**  
Republican District 7 State Representative  
900 Court St. NE  
Salem, Ore. 97301  
Phone: 503-986-1407  
Email: [rep.cedrichayden@state.or.us](mailto:rep.cedrichayden@state.or.us)
- **Rep. Peter DeFazio**  
(House of Representatives)  
405 East 8th Ave.  
#2030  
Eugene, Ore. 97401

### Oregon federal representatives

- Email: [defazio.house.gov/contact/email-peter](mailto:defazio.house.gov/contact/email-peter)  
Phone: 541-465-6732
- **Sen. Ron Wyden**  
405 East 8th Ave., Suite 2020  
Eugene, Ore. 97401  
Email: [wyden.senate.gov](mailto:wyden.senate.gov)  
Phone: (541) 431-0229
- **Sen. Jeff Merkley**  
Email: [merkley.senate.gov](mailto:merkley.senate.gov)  
Phone: 541-465-6750
- **Heather Buch**  
Lane County Commissioner - District 5  
Email: [Heather.Buch@lane-county.org](mailto:Heather.Buch@lane-county.org)  
125 E. Eighth Ave.  
Eugene, OR 97401  
Or call 541-682-4203

# Cottage Grove Sentinel

541-942-3325

### Administration

Jenna Bartlett, Group Publisher

Gary Manly, General Manager... Ext. 1207  
[gmanly@cgsentinel.com](mailto:gmanly@cgsentinel.com)

### Advertising

Gerald Santana, Multi-Media Sales Consultant... Ext. 1216  
[gsantana@cgsentinel.com](mailto:gsantana@cgsentinel.com)  
Carla Skeeel, Inside Multi-Media Sales Consultant... Ext. 1203  
[csuumers@cgsentinel.com](mailto:csuumers@cgsentinel.com)

### Editorial

Damien Sherwood, Editor... Ext. 1212  
[dsherwood@cgsentinel.com](mailto:dsherwood@cgsentinel.com)  
Kendrick Murphy, Sports/Education Reporter... Ext. 1204  
[kmurphy@cgsentinel.com](mailto:kmurphy@cgsentinel.com)  
Sophia Edelblute, Features Intern  
[sedelblute@cgsentinel.com](mailto:sedelblute@cgsentinel.com)

### Customer Service

Office Manager, Legals, Classifieds... Ext. 1200  
[mfringer@cgsentinel.com](mailto:mfringer@cgsentinel.com)  
Kurt Krueger, Circulation... Ext. 1213  
[kkrueger@cgsentinel.com](mailto:kkrueger@cgsentinel.com)

### Production

Ron Annis, Production Supervisor... Ext.1215  
[graphics@cgsentinel.com](mailto:graphics@cgsentinel.com)

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## LETTERS

### IN NEED OF MORE HEROES

Thank you to the Cottage Grove Sentinel for sharing the heroic deeds of Pat Gartman and Jim Jenkins with us — two local heroes who rushed to New York City in the aftermath of that horrific assault on America.

They must have been a great comfort to those that lost so much. We are very proud of you! We need more people to rush into dangerous situations to rescue those in need.

We need more people to get the shot and wear a face mask to protect their friends, family and others they come in contact with.