

## Equality as an Affirmation of Our Common Humanity

*Our government rests in public opinion. Whoever can change public opinion, can change the government, practically just so much. Public opinion, or any subject, always has a "central idea, from which all its minor thoughts radiate. That "central idea" in our political public opinion, at the beginning was, and until recently has continued to be, "the equality of men. --- Abraham Lincoln 1856*

At the time of a clash of civilizations it is not unusual for both sides to re-examine, define, and even sometimes codify their basic values and cultural institutions in order to both preserve and convey their basic values and traditions. At the time of the fall of communism in the Soviet Union and in Eastern Europe, the United States did this poorly. It appears that we are making a similar mistake in our war against terrorism, which is very much a battle of ideas and ideologies and will have to be understood as such for any chance of a long-term resolution and reconciliation. We are missing a defining opportunity in the history of the moral and political philosophy of the liberal tradition; first, by not defining our primary moral value as equality, understood as a respect for the dignity and worth of our common humanity; and second, by not defining our government as a constitutional democracy, which is the only way to convey both the substantive and the procedural concepts of equality that it incorporates.

At the time of the fall of communism, the media, the academics, and our government almost universally described the United States as a capitalistic democracy. This was in part because we allowed the Soviet Union to describe their communism to be primarily an economic system rather than a totalitarian political system, which denied any concept of moral or political equality. The primary alternative to communism should have been constitutional democracy. It is the constitutional aspects of our government, such as the Bill of Rights, that incorporate our substantive concepts of equality. The constitutional principles are placed beyond the usual majority rule of the legislative process. It is the democratic aspects of our government that incorporate the procedural aspects of equality, such as "one person, one vote."

Jefferson, Madison, Tocqueville, and Lincoln all considered equality to be the primary moral principle of constitutional democracy. Since the events of September 11, 2001, however, I cannot recall one instance of even a mention of equality. The terrorist attack of 9/ 11 was an attack on both our freedom and security and it is perhaps understandable that our values have thus been described primarily in those terms. In the Declaration of Independence, however, the first premise was that "all men are created equal" and that put everything that followed, including life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness, in a moral context. Even the great reformers, such as the women suffragettes and the Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr., did not repudiate these principles, but urged us to live up to them and place them into practice.

Donald Rumsfeld, the Secretary of Defense, was recently asked how the United States was faring against the extremist ideology in the global "battle of ideas." He said, "If I were grading, I would say that we probably deserve a D+ as a country." We are indeed in a "battle of ideas", in part, with a radical version of Islam. Islam, the religion of 1.2 billion people, is based on a submission to the will of God. Much of the liberty that we convey, on the other hand, is seen by others as the self-indulgence of our culture. We also unnecessarily lost much of the moral high ground with our initial waffling on the issues of torture and human rights.

During the current war on terrorism it may be appropriate that we emphasize freedom. To achieve our objectives we will also need the cooperation of many countries that are not constitutional democracies. To win the peace, however, we will need to understand and convey that our primary moral value is universal equality. It is such a recognition of our common humanity in a pluralistic world that makes the accommodation of a wide variety of attributes, cultural differences, desires, and beliefs possible without the use of coercion or being the cause of alienation.

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