



THE AMERICAN TESTAMENT

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The Gettysburg Address

Text

FOUR SCORE AND SEVEN YEARS AGO our fathers brought forth on this continent a new nation, conceived in liberty and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal.

Now we are engaged in a great civil war, testing whether that nation or any nation so conceived and so dedicated can long endure. We are met on a great battlefield of that war. We have come to dedicate a portion of that field as a final resting place for those who here gave their lives that that nation might live. It is altogether fitting and proper that we should do this.

But, in a larger sense, we cannot dedicate—we cannot consecrate—we cannot hallow—this ground. The brave men, living and dead, who struggled here have consecrated it far above our poor power to add or detract. The world will little note nor long remember what we say here, but it can never forget what they did here. It is for us, the living, rather, to be dedicated here to the unfinished work which they who fought here have thus far so nobly advanced.

It is rather for us to be here dedicated to the great task remaining before us—that from these honored dead we take increased devotion to that cause for which they gave the last full measure of devotion, that we here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain, that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom; and that government of the people, by the people, for the people shall not perish from the earth.

Analysis

ONE of the ceremonies arranged by the United States Civil War Centennial Commission commemorated the Gettysburg Address. At that ceremony, the poet Robert Lowell said: “The Gettysburg Address is a symbolic and sacramental act. Its verbal quality is resonance combined with a logical, matter of fact, prosaic brevity.”

The main intent here is to comment on the last clause of the Address, with its famous triad of prepositional phrases. However, the “resonance” Lowell spoke of should be briefly noted. That resonance, occurring on a “great battlefield” in “a great civil war,”

gives the Address its testamentary quality and grounds the plea for a renewed dedication.

**Four score and seven years ago our fathers
brought forth on this continent a new nation, . . .**

That the nation's birth date is July 4, 1776, is something we cannot imagine as ever having been in dispute. But it was not something taken for granted by Lincoln nor perfunctory for him. In his years of argument against the extension of slavery to new territories, Lincoln repeatedly appealed to the Declaration of Independence. His opponents resorted to the Constitution, with its covert references to the institution of slavery, as decisive for issues of policy regarding the extension of slavery. In effect, they took the adoption of the Constitution as the juridical birth date of the nation.

The impromptu remarks Lincoln made in Independence Hall, Philadelphia, February 22, 1861, on the eve of his inauguration, expressed his conviction about the guiding power of the Declaration of Independence.¹{Footnote 1 A small anthology of Lincoln's appeals to the Declaration could be assembled. For example, in his speech on the Dred Scott decision in 1857: "In those (early) days, our Declaration of Independence was held sacred by all and thought to include all; but now, to aid in making the bondage of the Negro universal and eternal, it is assailed and sneered at, and construed, and hawked at and torn, till, if its framers could rise from their graves, they could not at all recognize it."}

Or again, in the 1858 debates with Stephen A. Douglas, he said: "I have insisted that, in legislating for new countries, where slavery does not exist, there is no just rule other than that of moral and abstract right! With reference to those new countries, those maxims as to the right of people to 'life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness' were the just rules to be constantly referred to. There is no misunderstanding this, except by men interested 'to misunderstand it.'"}}

I am filled with deep emotion at finding myself standing here in the place where were collected together the wisdom, the patriotism, the devotion to principle, from which sprang the institutions under which we live. You have kindly suggested to me that in my hands is the task of restoring peace to our distracted country. I can say in return, sir, that all the political sentiments I entertain have been drawn, so far as I have been able to draw them, from the sentiments which originated, and were given to the world from this hall in which we stand. I have never had a feeling politically that did not spring from the

sentiments embodied in the Declaration of Independence. I have often pondered over the dangers which were incurred by the men who assembled here and adopted that Declaration of Independence—I have pondered over the toils that were endured by the officers and soldiers of the army, who achieved that Independence. I have often inquired of myself, what great principle or idea it was that kept this Confederacy so long together. It was not the mere matter of the separation of the colonies from the mother land; but something in that Declaration giving liberty, not alone to the people of this country, but hope to the world for all future time. It was that which *gave* promise that in due time the weights should be lifted from the shoulders of all men, and that *all* should have an equal chance. This is the sentiment embodied in that Declaration of Independence.

Now, my friends, can this country be saved upon that basis? If it can, I will consider myself one of the happiest men in the world if I can help to save it. If it can't be saved upon that principle, it will be truly awful. But, if this country cannot be saved without giving up that principle—I was about to say I would rather be assassinated on this spot than to surrender it.

At that place and time, Lincoln spoke in deeply personal tones. (Indeed, he had received warning of a plot to assassinate him when the presidential train passed through Baltimore.) However, what he says should be looked at apart from the fervor with which he says it.

A term from the Greek political lexicon can help us to convey what Lincoln is at some pains to say. In Aristotle's political philosophy, the *politeia* is what gives a particular *pais*, a particular city or state, its identity, its unity, its form. There is no single English word that will serve as a translation of *politeia*, but its meaning can be expressed by speaking of the formative principles or purposes to which a political community is dedicated. Borrowing a term from his philosophical biology, Aristotle speaks analogically of the *politeia* as the "soul" of the body politic, because it is the animating conception that the people have with regard to the meaning and purpose of their political association. The *politeia* is, therefore, antecedent to and deeper than the "constitution." The constitution, which consists in a definition and arrangement of offices, is devised to accord with and be in service to the *politeia*. Substantive

legislation under the constitution represents an effort to direct the political life in conformity with the *politeia*. In Aristotle's lexicon, a "revolution" is a change in the *politeia*. Any constitutional change or any major legislative policy in strong and durable violation of the *politeia* would constitute a revolution.

It is clear from the words Lincoln spoke in Independence Hall, and from his persistent invocation of the Declaration in many contexts, that Lincoln held the American *politeia* to have been revealed in the Declaration of Independence. The nation was born—"be-souled"—with the Declaration of Independence. Against Stephen Douglas, proposing to allow each new territory to decide for itself whether it wanted the institution of slavery, as well as against Justice. Taney, interpreting the Constitution as prohibiting any Federal act preventing the extension of slavery, Lincoln always appealed to the controlling authority of the Declaration, with its pivotal proposition about the equality of men. Any sophistical evasion of that proposition or any policy contravening its exigencies would be a revolutionary breach of the "ancient faith."

That Lincoln began his Address by fixing the birth date of the nation as the year of the Declaration cannot, therefore, be passed over lightly as if it were a mere rhetorical flourish.

. . . a new nation, conceived in liberty and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal.

Matthew Arnold, who prided himself on his ability to discern touchstones of great style, is reported to have said that he stopped reading when he came to the phrase about dedication to a "proposition." Lincoln's instinct for style caused him no qualms about the use of that term to designate an object to which men can be dedicated. In traditional logic, a proposition is a sentence setting forth something judged ("held") to be true. In the first line of the second paragraph of the Declaration, that men are equal is held to be true and is declared in a proposition.

Lincoln did not look upon the proposition about human equality as a hypothesis worth examination, or as a postulate for a kind of experiment, or as a beneficent sentiment. For him it was a truth affirmed. He was, of course, obligated to state what he understood the proposition about human equality to mean—what he thought the signers of the Declaration meant.

Shortly after the Dred Scott decision of March 1857, Lincoln learned from a speech by Stephen A. Douglas what Douglas thought the signers had meant. Douglas said:

No man can vindicate the character, motives, and conduct of the signers of the Declaration of Independence except upon the hypothesis that they referred to the white race alone, and not to the African, when they declared all men to have been created equal; that they were speaking of British subjects on this continent being equal to British subjects born and residing in Great Britain.

In a speech delivered at Springfield, Illinois, June 26, 1857, Lincoln referred to that reading of the proposition by Douglas, found it ludicrous, and could not refrain from somewhat prolonged ridicule of it:

My good friends, read that carefully over some leisure hour, and ponder well upon it—see what a mere wreck—mangled ruin—it makes of our once glorious Declaration.

“They were speaking of British subjects on this continent being equal to British subjects born and residing in Great Britain!” Why, according to this, not only Negroes but white people outside of Great Britain and America are not spoken of in that instrument. The English, Irish and Scotch, along with white Americans, were included to be sure, but the French, Germans and other white people of the world are all gone to pot along with the Judge’s ‘inferior races.

I had thought the Declaration promised something better than the condition of British subjects; but no, it only meant that we should be *equal* to them in their own oppressed and *unequal* condition. According to that, it gave no promise that having kicked off the King and Lords of Great Britain, we should not at once be saddled with a King and Lords of our own.

I had thought the Declaration contemplated the progressive improvement in the condition of all men everywhere; but no, it merely “was adopted for the purpose of justifying the colonists in the eyes of the civilized world in withdrawing their allegiance from the British Crown, and dissolving their connection with the mother country.” Why, that object having been effected some eighty years ago, the Declaration is of no practical use now—mere rubbish—old

wadding left to rot on the battlefield after the victory is won.

I understand you are preparing to celebrate the “Fourth,” tomorrow week. What for? The doings of that day had no reference to the present; and quite half of you are not even descendants of those who were referred to at that day. But I suppose you will celebrate; and will even go so far as to read the Declaration. Suppose after you read it once in the old fashioned way, you read it once more with Judge Douglas’ version. It will then run thus: “We hold these truths to be self-evident that all British subjects who were on this continent eighty-one years ago, were created equal to all British subjects born and *then* residing in Great Britain.”

And now I appeal to all—to Democrats as well as others,—are you really willing that the Declaration shall be thus frittered away? thus left no more at most, than an interesting memorial of the dead past? thus shorn of its vitality, and practical value; and left without the *germ* or even the *suggestion* of the individual rights of man in it?

Lincoln was equally outraged by the view expressed by Chief Justice Taney in the Dred Scott decision: “The Constitution recognizes the right of property of the master in a slave, and makes no distinction between that description of property and other property owned by a citizen. [Hence], no tribunal, acting under the authority of the United States, whether it be legislative, executive, or judicial, has a right to draw such a distinction or deny to it the benefit of the provisions and guarantees which have been provided for the protection of private property against the encroachments of the government. . . . The right of property in a slave is distinctly and expressly affirmed in the Constitution.”

Against such statements by Douglas and Taney, Lincoln had to offer his own interpretation of the Declaration, and especially to “vindicate the character, motives, and conduct of the signers of the Declaration of Independence” on some other hypothesis than Douglas’s, “that they referred to the white race alone.” In his speech at Springfield, Illinois, in 1857, Lincoln did precisely that.

Chief Justice Taney, in his opinion in the Dred Scott case, admits that the language of the Declaration is broad enough to include the whole human family, but he and Judge Douglas argue that the authors of that

instrument did not intend to include Negroes by the fact that they did not at once actually place them on an equality with the whites. Now this grave argument comes to just nothing at all, by the other fact, that they did not at once, *or ever afterwards*, actually place all white people on an equality with one or another. And this is the staple argument of both the Chief Justice and the Senator for doing this obvious violence to the plain, unmistakable language of the Declaration.

I think the authors of that notable instrument intended to include *all* men, but they did not intend to declare all men equal *in all respects*. They did not mean to say all were equal in color, size, intellect, moral developments, or social capacity. They defined with tolerable distinctness, in what respects they did consider all men created equal—equal with “certain inalienable rights, among which are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.” This they said, and this they meant. They did not mean to assert the obvious untruth, that all were then actually enjoying that equality, nor yet, that they were about to confer it immediately upon them. In fact they had no power to confer such a boon. They meant simply to declare the *right*, so that the *enforcement* of it might follow as fast as circumstances should permit.

They meant to set up a standard maxim for free society, which should be familiar to all, and revered by all; constantly looked to, constantly labored for, and even though never perfectly attained, constantly approximated, and thereby constantly spreading and deepening its influence, and augmenting the happiness and value of life to all people of all colors everywhere. The assertion that “all men are created equal” was of no practical use in effecting our separation from Great Britain; and it was placed in the Declaration, not for that, but for future use. Its authors meant it to be, [as,) thank God, it is now proving itself, a stumbling block to those who in after times might seek to turn a free people back into the hateful paths of despotism. They knew the proneness of prosperity to breed tyrants, and they meant when such should re-appear in this fair land and commence their vocation they should find left for them at least one hard nut to crack.

I have now briefly expressed my view of the *meaning* and *objects* of that part of the Declaration of Independence which declares that “all men are created equal.”

To return to the Gettysburg Address, it goes on as follows:

Now we are engaged in a great civil war, testing whether that nation or any nation so conceived and so dedicated can long endure. We are met on a great battlefield of that war.

Was it unseemly to speak of the terrible civil war as a *great* war, of Gettysburg as a *great* battlefield? Lincoln was surely not speaking of the intensity or of the unexpected duration of the war. He was thinking of the magnitude of the issue that was being tested. It was not just whether *this* nation but whether *any* nation so conceived and so dedicated could long endure.

With the words “or any nation,” Lincoln raised the question of the worldwide significance of the American model. In his First Inaugural Address, Washington had said: “The sacred fire of liberty and the destiny of the republican model of government are justly considered, perhaps, as *deeply*, as *finally*, staked on the experiment entrusted to the hands of the American people.” Washington was echoing what every major revolutionary leader had said about the world meaning of the American Revolution—John Adams, James Madison, Alexander Hamilton, Thomas Jefferson.

Lincoln had many times spoken in the same vein. On the way to his first inauguration, Lincoln addressed the New Jersey Senate. After recalling his boyhood reading, in Parson Weems’s *Life of Washington*, of the military struggles around Trenton, he said:

I recollect thinking then, boy even though I was, that there must have been something more than common that those men struggled for. I am exceedingly anxious that that thing which they struggled for—that something even more than National Independence; that something that held out a great promise to all the people of the world for all time to come—I am exceedingly anxious that this Union, the Constitution, and the liberties of the people shall be perpetuated in accordance with the original idea for which that struggle was made, and I shall be most happy indeed if I shall be an humble instrument in the hands of the Almighty, and of this, his almost chosen people, for perpetuating the object of that great struggle.

For Lincoln, what came into being with the war that gave the nation its birth, and held out a great promise to the people of the world for all time to come, was *the* issue in the Civil War. None of the *Federalist Papers* had been more cogent and persuasive than those which argued that progress “towards a more perfect union” was the absolutely necessary condition for a good test of “the experiment entrusted to the hands of the American people.” Failing a firm and durable union, the American continent, argued the Federalists, would recapitulate the internecine history of Europe.

Lincoln was convinced that saving the Union was something fateful for all mankind and all future history. Even though, as he said in his Second Inaugural Address, everyone knew that “a peculiar and powerful interest” in the institution of slavery “was *somehow* the cause of the war,” the perpetuation of the Union was more important than the fate of slavery in the country.

On that point, Lincoln had been fiercely lucid fourteen months before Gettysburg. An old friend of his, Horace Greeley, in an open letter entitled “The Prayer of Twenty Millions,” had accused Lincoln of harboring proslavery sentiments. Lincoln answered him in a personal letter:

As to the policy I “seem to be pursuing,” as you say, I have not meant to leave anyone in doubt.

I would save the Union. I would save it the shortest way under the Constitution. The sooner the national authority can be restored; the nearer the Union will be “the Union as it was.” If there be those who would not save the Union, unless they could at the same time *save* slavery, I do not agree with them. If there be those who would not save the Union unless they could at the same time *destroy* slavery, I do not agree with them. My paramount object in this struggle *is* to save the Union, and is *not* either to save or to destroy slavery. If I could save the Union without freeing any slave I would do it; and if I could save it by freeing *all* the slaves I would do it; and if I could save it by freeing some and leaving others alone I would also do that. What I do about slavery, and the colored race, I do because I believe it helps to save the Union; and what I forbear, I forbear because I do *not* believe it would help to save the Union. I shall do *less* whenever I shall believe what I am doing hurts the cause, and I shall do *more* whenever I shall believe doing more will help the cause. I shall try to correct

errors when shown to be errors; and I shall adopt new views so fast as they shall appear to be true views.

I have here stated my purpose according to my view of *official* duty, and I intend no modification of my oft-expressed personal wish that all men everywhere could be free.

Yours, A. LINCOLN

Despite the reiteration, “saving the Union,” taken by itself, did not yield the moral justification for the Civil War. Saving the Union was of such awesome importance only because the preservation of the Union was indispensable to this nation’s promotion of “that something,” struggled for in the War of Independence, which “held out a great promise to all the people of the world for all time to come.” This point becomes firmly clear at the end of the Address.

After words of deep respect for the dead, Lincoln turns to what the living must take from the dead:

It is rather for us to be here dedicated to the great task remaining before us—that from these honored dead we take increased devotion to that cause for which they gave the last full measure of devotion, that we here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain, *that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom; and that government of the people, by the people, for the people shall not perish from the earth.*

The “unfinished work,” “the great task remaining before us,” “that cause for which they gave the last full measure of devotion”—these are articulated in the last two clauses of the Address, which are statements of purpose. The first purpose concerns *this* nation—that *it* “shall have a new birth of freedom.” The second concerns the historical future of an idea—the idea of democracy—that it “shall not perish from the earth.”

Some, if not all, of the revolutionary leaders believed that somehow, by the very circumstances of the nation’s birth, the idea of democracy was held in trust by America. For Lincoln it was precisely that trust which was being tested in a great Civil War.

Lincoln formulated the idea of democracy in what has become a world-famous trinity of prepositional phrases:

. . . government of the people, by the people, for the people . . .

This tripartite formula has acquired widespread talismanic power. It has always been invoked by the American people as an inspired formula. However, if we take this triad of prepositional phrases as a compressed formulation of the idea of democracy, it is necessary to ask a number of questions which aim at explicating its meaning.

We are led to such questions by the comments of Bertrand De Jouvenel, a distinguished French political philosopher and political scientist. In a paper entitled *What is Democracy?*, written in 1958 for a conference on "Representative Government and Public Liberties in the New States," De Jouvenel found Lincoln's "formula" a ludicrous failure, even something of a hoax.² {Footnote 2 2 Another denigration of Lincoln's "formula" can be found in Giovanni Sartori's *Democratic Theory* (pp. 26-27, Praeger, 1965). Sartori writes: "It is symptomatic that [Lincoln's] aphorism defies analysis and poses insoluble problems of interpretation. . . . The truth is that Lincoln's words have stylistic impetus rather than logical meaning. As they stand they constitute, strictly speaking, an inexplicable proposition."} De Jouvenel's findings are useful as yielding the questions that we must ask about Lincoln's formula.

In regard to "*government of the people*," De Jouvenel writes: "Let me first note that any *de facto* authority, habitually obeyed and acknowledged by a people, is its government; the first term, therefore, merely tells us that a government must be obeyed and acknowledged by the people; if not, it is not the government of the people, but then it is no government at all."

In regard to "*government by the people*," De Jouvenel interprets it to mean that "all decisions are jointly taken by all members of the community assembled for that purpose"; this, he says, describes "no government as we know it"; it is applicable only to ancient Athens and a few anomalous, small, short-lived communities in Western history.

In regard to "*government for the people*," De Jouvenel writes: "The last term reminds us that a government has a moral obligation of seeking the good of the people; this is valid for a government of whatever origin or form." Accordingly, in his view, Lincoln's third term in no way catches something distinctive about democracy.

Our response to De Jouvenel must begin by conceding that the only way to counter his attack is by treating Lincoln's triad of phrases as an oracle—compressed, cryptic, expressing deep truths.

. . . government of the people . . .

Grammarians have long since noted an ambiguity in the use of the genitive case. On the one hand, the phrase, “the love of God” (by man) can be used to designate the love that is directed to God as an object of love. The genitive is then an *objective genitive*. On the other hand, “the love of God” can be used to designate the love that God has for man. The genitive is then a *possessive genitive*.

Lincoln's oracular “of” is what might be called a “deliberate double-genitive.” He did not need to be told by De Jouvenel that “government” is a relative term, so that where there is “government,” there has to be a “governed.” Democracy is not anarchy. It involves government and therefore those who are governed—the subjects or objects of government. (Even in so-called “direct democracy,” there is a distinction between the people-as-governing and the people-as-governed.) Hence the phrase “government of the people” involves an objective genitive: The people are governed.

However, in a democracy that is genuine, the people are governed by a government that is *theirs*, by a government that belongs to them, as an instrument belongs to its user. It is, therefore, necessary to distinguish between a people conceived as submitting to a government that claims to derive its authority and power from sources which are wholly extraneous to them (as is the case in an absolute monarchy or despotism), and a people conceived as under a government that derives its authority and power from their consent.

Given the privileges of the oracular style, Lincoln's first prepositional phrase contains a possessive genitive at the same time that it contains an objective genitive.³{Footnote 3 In two passages, often considered as probable sources in his memory for Lincoln's triad of phrases, the possessive genitive had made a firm appearance. Daniel Webster, in his famous Reply to Hayne, a speech Lincoln is known to have read and valued, used these words: “The people's government, made for the people, made by the people, and answerable to the people.” In a major opinion, *M'Culloch v. Maryland*, Chief Justice John Marshall had written: “The government of the Union is emphatically and truly a government of the people. In form and in substance it emanates from them. Its powers are granted by them, and are to be exercised directly on them and for their benefit.”} That possessive genitive calls attention to the fundamental distinction between constitutional and despotic government—a government of laws as contrasted with a

government by men. Constitutional government is government that derives its authority and power from the consent of the people, and is therefore *their* government. Constitutional government takes different forms: It is oligarchical or democratic depending on the meaning of the words “the people” in the phrase “government of the people,” as well as in the other two phrases associated with it. If “the people” stands for the whole human population of the political community—all except the few who can be justly excepted, such as infants or hospitalized mental incompetents—then we have the specific form of government known as constitutional democracy. Lincoln’s adherence to the proposition about human equality in the Declaration, together with its consequential avowal of the possession by all of the same inherent and unalienable human rights, must persuade us that when he spoke of “government of the people, by the people, and for the people,” he had constitutional democracy in mind, not merely as one specific form of government among others, but as the only just form of government—more just than a constitutional oligarchy in which the consenting people are a privileged few, and much more just than a despotic or absolute government in which the people are the subjects of a government that is in no sense theirs because it in no way involves their consent or participation.

The significance of the possessive genitive in the initial phrase—“government of the people”—can be summarized in the following propositions that any defender of the rightness of constitutional government should affirm as true. They provide us with the definitive solution of a problem that has persisted throughout the whole tradition of Western political thought—the problem about the source of the authority and the grounds for the legitimacy of governments.

1. Authority is not possessed by a government merely as a result of the *de facto* submission of the governed to the power it is able to exert over them.
2. A government has genuine authority—the right to govern—only when such authority is conferred on it, or transmitted to it, by acts of the people as its consenting constituents, originating, constitutive acts, interim acts of consent, and periodically recurring electoral acts.
3. While such authority is possessed and exercised by the officeholders or officials in a constitutional government, it is held and exercised by them in dependence on the people to whom it principally and inalienably belongs.
4. Just as in the physical world, an instrumental cause, such as the painter’s brush, has its causal power imparted to it by the principal cause, the painter’s art, so in the political

realm, the governing bodies in a constitutional government function as an instrument empowered by the people.

. . . government . . . by the people . . .

At the time that Lincoln spoke, he was the head of a government in a not-all-that-small society. It is way off the mark for De Jouvenel or anybody else to suggest that Lincoln, in a spasm of rhetorical excitement, was trying to suggest that the government of the United States was a government-of-everybody-by-everybody—government by the assembly of all the citizens, as in Athens or in a New England town.

The leaders of the revolutionary and constitutional period had spoken of “self-government,” even though, because of the size of the society, such government would involve representation in a legislative body rather than the direct participation of the citizens in a public assembly. In *Federalist #39*, Madison wrote: “It is evident that no other form of government would be reconcilable with the genius of the people of America; with the fundamental principles of the Revolution; or with that honorable determination which animates every votary of freedom, to rest all our political experiments on the capacity of mankind for self-government.” The fathers of the republic were not intimidated by the paradoxes often supposed to lie in the term “self-government.” Those paradoxes, largely verbal, can be discounted by considering the relation between rulers and ruled under a constitutional government.

Aristotle had pointed out, many centuries before, that under constitutional government the citizens rule and are ruled in turn. They are both rulers and ruled. The office of citizenship is the primary and permanent office in a constitutional regime; all other offices, including that of the chief magistrate, are secondary offices, to which citizens are eligible and which some of them fill for a period of time, to resume their status as private citizens when they leave public office.

The people—the body of the citizens constituting the ruling class—must, therefore, be regarded as the permanent principal rulers in a constitutional democracy. The officeholders, the public officials or magistrates to whom the administration of the government is entrusted while they hold office, are by contrast with the citizens the transient instrumental rulers, directly or indirectly elected by the people and responsible to them. This relationship between private citizens and public officials may be concealed by the verbal habit of referring to officialdom—the collection of temporary officeholders or magistrates—as “the government.” We speak of a change of government when one set of officials leaves office to be replaced by another; but actually it is only a change in the administration of the government. The framework of

government remains unchanged, and in that framework the citizens remain the principal rulers and the temporary occupants of public offices function as their instruments of self-government.⁴ {Footnote 4 Lincoln’s language in his First Inaugural is worth noticing: “Doing this [taking care that the laws of the Union be faithfully executed in all the states] I deem to be only a simple duty on my part; and I shall perform it, so far as practicable, unless my rightful masters, the American people, shall withhold the requisite means or in some authoritative manner direct the contrary.”}

Under the Constitution of the United States, officeholders wield whatever authority and power are vested in their office by the Constitution. Neither the authority nor the power belongs to them personally, but rather to the office they hold. They exercise it only as officeholders. Their exercise of it is subject, even concurrently with that exercise, to such critical inspection and control by the people as will not render them impotent for the performance of their designated instrumental functions. In addition, they are liable to impeachment and removal from office when they exceed the constitutional authority vested in their office or usurp powers not allotted to them, as well as when they commit other high crimes and misdemeanors. A constitutional government is thus a government of laws in the sense that no man is above the law and no man has political authority or legitimate power except that which is conferred upon him by the people who govern themselves through the services of their political instruments—public officials or officeholders.

To say that constitutional democracy is both government *of* the people and government *by* the people is to say that the people are both the constituents of government through acts of consent to the constitution which they have adopted as the framework of government, and also that they are enfranchised citizens participating through the exercise of their suffrage in self-government—not directly, but indirectly through their representatives upon whom they have conferred the authority to administer the functions of government. In the last analysis, government in a democracy, even if it is through representatives rather than through the direct action of the citizens, is government by the people.

... government ... *for* the people ...

As De Jouvenel pointed out, the phrase, taken by itself, refers to something that is common to all forms of government which are good or just; namely, that they consist in government for the public good, the good of the governed or the community as a whole, not government in the service of the private interests of those who administer the functions of government.

However, democratic governments are charged with doing more *for* the people than are benevolent monarchies and wise aristocracies, precisely because constitutional democracy is fundamentally an experiment in self-government. Just as government *by* the people takes on a special significance from the fact that it is, first of all, the people's government, so too government *for* the people draws its full force from the antecedent fact that it is both government *of* and also *by* the people.

The idea of democracy presupposes that all men are not only equal under the law but equal as well in their claim to the rights of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness that a just government must try to make secure for them. Accordingly, democratic governments have an obligation that is inherent in the idea of democracy but alien to the idea of monarchy and the idea of aristocracy—the obligation to secure for all the rights to which all have an equal claim.

The Preamble's statement of the purposes of our government enunciates an articulation of the common good. Of the six purposes or objectives of government there stated, the last calls for something that is specific to a constitutional democracy and that enlarges — and immeasurably deepens—the conception of the common good. No other form of government is called upon by its constituents “to secure the blessings of liberty for ourselves and our posterity.”

Being a limited government, a constitutional democracy is restrained from invading certain precincts of purely personal liberty. Being accountable to the people, it must not only respect, but it must also strive to enhance, those freedoms which the people need for the mature, critical control of government—freedom of thought, freedom of expression, freedom of association and of public assembly, freedom to dissent and to petition for the redress of grievances.

Because the idea of democracy entails such additional things that a democratic government is obliged to do *for* the people, democracy is pre-eminently “government *for* the people,” and, therefore, once again in Jefferson's words, “the only truly just form of government.”

If the idea of democracy became at this nation's birth something it regarded itself as holding in trust for the world and for the future, and if Lincoln's oracular triad of prepositional phrases indeed epitomizes that idea, then we have not been wrong in regarding Lincoln's last ten words as the focal point of the American Testament.



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