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Our Constitution: A Meaningless Old Parchment?

Today we are bombarded with the idea that private virtue has nothing to do with, nothing to say about, proper governing and the maintenance of free government.



Not so among America's Founders. On August 14, 1787, John Francis Mercer, a Delegate from Maryland to the Constitutional Convention, rose to his feet and observed:

What led to the appointment of this Convention? The corruption and mutability of the Legislative Councils of the States. If the plan does not remedy these, it will not recommend itself; and we shall not be able in our private capacities to support and enforce it: nor will the best part of our Citizens exert themselves for the purpose. — It is a great mistake to suppose that the paper we are to propose will govern the United States. It is the men whom it will bring into the Government and interest in maintaining it that is to govern them. The paper will only mark out the mode and the form. Men are the substance and must do the business. (1)

The Founders were debating whether or not members of the House of Representatives could be appointed to “civil offices” in the nation’s capitol while in office, or immediately upon finishing their term in office. Mr. Mercer was adding his voice to the common concern of many of his fellow delegates that we need fear putting Congressmen in the path of temptation, a temptation that might easily lead the best men to political corruption rather than to loyalty to the Constitution, and to the Country, and to the people who put them in office and whom they are elected to represent. Let these men be corrupted — in this case by the lure of money and security over constitutional principles and moral duty —and what have we for a Constitution? He said it well: a meaningless, powerless scrap of paper.

Indeed, morality matters. It always has. For while a solid Constitution, the best of all Constitutions, is necessary to the endurance of a free state, and we have such a Constitution; no nation can long endure a government run by ambitious scoundrels and moral pygmies, whether elected or appointed for life. Such men, and in 2010 America has far too great a sampling of them, worry little about checks and balances, the rule of law, and the liberties of the people, excepting how to maneuver around them, ignore them, or run roughshod over them, till there is nothing left but a collection of faded words on a crumbling two-and-a-quarter-century-old piece of parchment that few read, revere, or even remember.

Or worse ...

Footnote:

1. Madison's Notes to the Debates in the Federal Convention of 1787, 14 August 1787. John Francis Mercer was a Maryland Delegate to the Convention.

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