

Hope, Flag, and the Fire Bell (in the Night)

by

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November 8, 2019

No person shall be a Senator or Representative in Congress...
who, having previously taken an oath, as a member of Congress...
to support the Constitution of the United States, shall have engaged
in insurrection or rebellion against the same...

Amendment XIV, Section 3¹

*So we raise her up every morning
We take her down every night
We don't let her touch the ground and we fold her up right
On second thought, I do like to brag
'Cause I'm mighty proud of that ragged old flag*

Ragged Old Flag²

But this momentous question, like a fire bell in the night,
awakened and filled me with terror.
I considered it at once as the knell of the Union.
It is hushed, indeed, for the moment.
But this is a reprieve only, not a final sentence.

Thomas Jefferson in Letter to John Holmes³

¹ Amendments to the Constitution of the United States of America.

² <https://www.lyrics.com/lyric/308269/johnnycash>

³ <https://teachingamericanhistory.org/library/document/letter-to-john-holmes/>

Introduction

As a country we have been split in our beliefs since the beginning. The problem today is like it was in the mid 1600's with the Civil War, maybe like it was early in the 1940s with "shall we fight or not?" The real problem today is we are on the verge of having another split and maybe another war. The 2020 election will be the election of all elections.

Will this be our finest hour or will it be our blackest?

The operative word is Hope – we are a Land of Hope. In this land we fly our flag. In this land of hope we are one country – and we govern ourselves. Our elected officials believe in the Constitution. We have the freedom to have guns (or not) – it is a choice (today). The verse goes "land of the free and home of the brave" – with rifles we go marching off to war...(what is your verse?).

As I sit in my carrel hammering away with this pep talk (mostly for me) I hear in my mind a dull, far off, ringing. It is as if the bell tolls. It is as if a bell ringing. Like Jefferson I hear what sounds like a warning. I hear the fire bell in the night. *The fire bell is ringing* – it says we could lose the election.

Here follows some random, pithy, and pertinent quotes I have ferreted out of some history lessons to give us a boost and maybe stop the far off ringing .

McClay

*When a day passes it is no longer there.
What remains of it?
Nothing more than a story.
If stories weren't told or books weren't written,
man would live like the beasts, only for the day.
The whole world, all human life, is one long story.⁴*

"Every generation rewrites the past. In easy times history is more or less of an ornamental art, but in times of danger we are driven to the written record by a pressing need to find answers to the riddles of today. We need to know what kind of firm ground other men, belonging to generations before us, have found to stand on...

"We need to know how they did it.

"In times of change and danger when there is a quicksand of fear under men's reasoning, a sense of continuity with generations gone before can stretch like a lifeline across the scary present and get us past that idiot delusion of the exceptional Now that blocks good thinking. That is why, in times like ours, when old institutions not necessarily in accord with most men's preconceived hopes, political thought has to look backwards as well as forwards."⁵

"Isn't that marvelous? There's so much to unpack in it, but of special relevance today is his rather rough denunciation of 'that idiot delusion of the exception Now.' This phrase expresses something that nearly all of us who teach history run up against. It's harder than usual today to get young people interested in the past because they are so firmly convinced that we're living in a time so unprecedented, enjoying pocket-sized technologies that are so transformative, that there's no point in

⁴ The words of the great Jewish writer Isaac Bashevis Singer. This from McClay, 2019, page 3.

⁵ These are words from John Dos Passos (1941) in his essay "The Use of the Past" and taken from: Wilfred M. McClay (August 2019). *Imprimis: Rediscovering the wisdom in American history*. Hillsdale.edu.

looking at what went on in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. To them the past has been superseded – just as our present world is forever in the process of being superseded” (McClay, *Imprimis*, p. 4).

Lincoln said on the very day of his assassination:

“I hope there will be no persecution, no bloody work after the war is over...Enough lives have been sacrificed. We must extinguish our resentment if we expect harmony and union. There has been too much of a desire on the part of some of our very good friends to be masters, to interfere with and dictate to those states, to treat the people not as fellow citizens; there is too little respect for their rights. I do not sympathize with these feelings” (From McClay: A Lincoln quote, p. 7).⁶

Kimball

“Of course, impermissible attitudes and images are never in short supply once the itch to stamp out history gets going. Two years ago it was Calhoun and representations of the Antebellum South. More recently it was a carving at an entrance to Yale’s Sterling Memorial Library depicting an Indian and a Puritan. The Puritan, if you can believe it, was holding a musket – a gun! Who knows, perhaps he was a member of the NRA or at least could give inspiration to other members of that very un-Yale-like organization” (p. 3).⁷

“And what about Thomas Jefferson and George Washington? They both owned slaves, as did 41 of the 56 signers of the Declaration of Independence. What about them? To listen to many race peddlers these days, you would think they regarded George Orwell’s warning in *1984* as a how-to manual: ‘Every record has been destroyed or falsified,’ Orwell wrote,

every book has been rewritten,
every picture has been repainted,
every statue and street and
building has been renamed,
every date has been altered. And
that process is continuing day by
day and minute by minute.
History has stopped.

“The old idea of tolerance was summed up in such chestnuts as, ‘I disapprove of what you say, but I will defend to the death your right to say it.’ The new dispensation is: ‘I disapprove of what you say, therefore you may not say it’” (Kimball, p. 7).

Kesler

“Plan B was the living Constitution. While keeping the outward forms of the old Constitution, the idea of a living Constitution would change utterly the spirit in which the Constitution was understood. The resulting Constitution – let us call it ‘the liberal Constitution’ – is not a constitution of natural rights or individual human rights, but of historical or evolutionary right. Wilson called the spirit of the old Constitution Newtonian...the liberal Constitution would be easily amenable to experimentation and adjustment. To paraphrase the late Walter Berns, the point of the old Constitution was to keep the

⁶ McClay in this *Imprimis* is touting his book *The Land of Hope*. Yes, he does talk about slavery.

⁷ Roger Kimball (February 2019). *Imprimis: Shall we defend our common history?* Hillsdale.edu.

times in tune with the Constitution; the purpose of the new is to keep the Constitution in tune with the times” (Kesler, p. 3).⁸

“If one thinks about how America’s cold civil war could be resolved, there seem to be only five possibilities:

One. Change the political subject or “...Similarly, if some jarring event intervenes – a major war or a huge natural calamity – it might reset our politics.”

Two. “If we can’t change the subject, is that we could change our minds.” Kesler uses persuasion and moderation to move American public opinion and spends time discussing Reagan, Roosevelt, and Trump examples saying the ‘embittered trajectory of our politics over the last two decades’ seems unlikely. He says given their fundamental nature and our disagreements, learning to live with them more or less permanently, and again, “seems unlikely.”

Three. “Vastly reinvigorated federalism.” He suggests it could be handled by the states themselves (for me, the Convention of States is must option).

Four, “...alas, is secession.” He points to James Madison writing about this danger in *The Federalist Papers*. (Also an option - better than war.)

Five, “...and worst possibility: hot civil war.”

Kesler sees some kind of an approaching crisis between the two Constitutions and says “let us pray that we and our countrymen will find a way to reason together and to compromise...that we will find, that is, the better angels of our nature” (p. 5).

Arnn

Larry Arnn has two very small quotes from a very large biography of Winston Churchill:

1. “The central principle of Civilization is the subordination of the ruling authority to the settled customs of the people and to their will as expressed through the Constitution. There must be ‘a people,’ and they must have ‘customs’ and a ‘Constitution’” (Arnn, p. 5).⁹

2. “Churchill was a lifelong opponent of socialism and bureaucracy. He saw in them a conscription of private resources that would undermine the ability of people to live freely and under their own command, just as modern war threatened to do. If the government deploys, directly or indirectly, more than half the resources in the economy, what place is there for ordinary people to control the government and to control their own lives?” (Arnn, Three lessons, p. 7).¹⁰

⁸ Charles R. Kesler (October 2018). *Imprimis: America’s cold civil war*. Hillsdale.edu.

⁹ Larry P. Arnn. (December 2018). *Imprimis: Do we need our country anymore?* Hillsdale.edu.

¹⁰ Larry P. Arnn. (December 2017). *Imprimis: Three lessons of statesmanship*. Hillsdale.edu.

McClay (again)

Going back to McClay's book¹¹ a couple of items of interest showed up:

1. "The election returns for November 1860...Lincoln won 180 electoral votes from all eighteen free states – and from *only* those states. He got not a single electoral vote from the South...Lincoln's election was momentous in a great many ways, but first and foremost, he was the first president elected to office on the basis of an entirely regional victory" (p. 169). The southerners had a 'compact' theory which said those southern states had a compact between preexisting states saying they could withdraw from the compact. This meant if Lincoln were to win they would have no choice but to succeed from the union. Course, this is what the Civil War was fought for.

2. Two days before Lincoln's inauguration on March 2, 1861 the Corwin Amendment was passed by the House and the Senate needing only to be ratified by the states. This amendment "would have explicitly protected slavery where it already existed." Lincoln and Steward, antislavery men they were supported this measure which was contrary to their "own moral sentiments," Lincoln made his "House Divided" speech on June 16, 1858 saying "the nation could not endure 'permanently half slave and half free' but that it would have to 'become all one thing or all the other'" (p. 170).

Arnn historically presents these times rather well in his book.

3. What I didn't know was the Republicans voted him in with the 18 northern states. Not one vote came out of the south as these folks were all Democrats.

4. We are in just about as bad today with the slavery, black, white, liberal, socialist, and a ton more as we were then. We are still fighting the same fight they fought in the Civil War...hence, some comments on the issues in this paper...fire bells and all.

Bloom

"Yet the Constitution does not promise respect for blacks, whites, yellows, Catholics, Protestants, or Jews. It guarantees the protection of the rights of individual human beings. This has not proved to be enough, however, to what is perhaps by now a majority of Americans"¹² (Bloom, pp. 33-34).

"America tells one story: the unbroken, ineluctable progress of freedom and equality. From its first settlers and its political foundings on, there has been no dispute that freedom and equality are the essence of justice for us. No one serious or notable has stood outside this consensus.. All significant political disputes have been about the meaning of freedom and equality, not about their rightness. Nowhere else is there a tradition or a culture whose message is so distinct and unequivocal...

"Everybody can, however, articulate what Americanness is. And that Americanness generated a race of heroes – Franklin, Washington, Hamilton, Jefferson, Lincoln and so on – all of whom contributed to equality...Our heroes and the language of the Declaration contribute to a national reverence for our Constitution, also a unique phenomenon.

¹¹ Wilfred M. McClay. (2019). *Imprimis. Land of hope: An invitation to the great American story*. New York, NY: Encounter Books.

¹² Allan Bloom. (1987). *The closing of the American mind*. New York, NY: A Touchstone Book.

“But the unity, grandeur and attendant folklore of the founding heritage was attacked from so many directions in the last half-century that it gradually disappeared from daily life and from textbooks” (pp. 54-55).

“Though students do not have books, they most emphatically do have music...Today...young people...live for music...Nothing surrounding them – school, family, church – has anything to do with their musical world...It is available twenty-four hours a day, everywhere” (p. 68).

“Classical music is dead among the young” (p. 69).

“No classical music has been produced that can speak to this generation” (p. 70).

“The students will get over this music, or at least the exclusive passion for it...They will want to get ahead and live comfortable. But this life is as empty and false...This is what liberal education is meant to show them. But as long as they have the Walkman on, they cannot hear what the great tradition has to say. And, after its prolonged use, when they take it off, they find they are deaf” (pp. 80-81).

“The one eccentric element in this portrait, the one failure – a particularly grave one inasmuch as it was the part most fraught with hope – is the relation between blacks and whites” (p. 91).

“Thus, just at the moment when everyone else has become a ‘person,’ blacks have become blacks” (p. 92).

“Blacks are not sharing a special positive intellectual or moral experience; they partake fully in the common culture, with the same goals and tastes as everyone else, but they are doing it by themselves. They continue to have the inward sentiments of separateness caused by exclusion when it no longer effectively exists. The heat is under the pot, but they do not melt as have *all* other groups...

“But the movement of the blacks goes counter not only to that of the rest of society, and tends to put them at odds with it, but also to their own noblest claims and traditions in this country” (p. 93).

“This is the American moment in world history, the one for which we shall forever be judged” (p. 382).

Closing

Kimball’s final remarks are a perfect closing for this paper:

“The monument controversy shows the susceptibility of ‘liberating tolerance’ to fanaticism. And it reminds us that in the great battle between the partisans of freedom and the inebriates of virtue, freedom is ultimately negotiable – until it muses itself to fight back. At stake is nothing less than the survival of our common history” (p. 7).

Study questions

- a. What was the “momentous question” in Jefferson’s fire bell in the night?
- b. Of Kesler’s “cold civil war possibilities,” which one is your first choice? Why?
- c. Which author in this paper appeals to your sentiments the most? Explain.
- d. Is there a fire bell ringing in your head over where we are in our country? How will you silence it?