



THE VIEW

Issue #13

June 29, 2009

GOVERNING FOR A FREE PEOPLE IS HARD WORK

BY

MARTY WISEMAN, Ph.D.

All over the globe there is a great deal of weeping, wailing, and gnashing of teeth with regard to the actions of the governing entities of numerous countries. We in the United States are certainly not immune from this. Many of these heated, and in some cases bloody, debates go deeply to the heart of the fundamental purpose of government and the roles of the people governed. Thus, it is perhaps fortunate that we in the United States are afforded a moment to pause and consider the actions that started it all as far as self government in this country is concerned. It is indeed fortuitous that the Fourth of July is a holiday. This pause to reflect on the nation's political origins is just what is needed at just this moment.

Perhaps we are limited in our thinking when we overemphasize the role of the Declaration of Independence as merely the trigger that led to the Revolutionary War and ultimately to our independence from Great Britain. It was certainly important for this, but, beyond that, the Declaration of Independence, brief document though it was, set forth the goals for the proper role of government that became the reasons for such bold action. Thus, the basis for what ultimately has become the world's longest serving Constitution was originally embodied in the Declaration of independence.

Borrowing heavily from British philosophers of individual freedom such as John Locke, Thomas Jefferson wrote that people had God-given rights that could not be taken away by government. Locke had often argued that all legitimate political authority exists to preserve these rights and that such authority should be based solely on the consent of those who are governed. When those who govern overstep their authority, then the governed have the right to remove these rulers. Jefferson, following this line of thinking, went on to list a "bill of particulars" against the King of England, hence making the case that the King had indeed abrogated his authority. In summary, Jefferson stated that people have a right to revolt if they determine that their government is denying them their legitimate rights. He concluded that the colonies were "Free and Independent States" with no political connection to Great Britain. By August of 1776, fifty-four revolutionaries had followed the bold lead of John Hancock and signed their name to the Declaration of Independence. Had the fledgling country lost the war the British penalty for treason would have been horrendous.

The United States did indeed win the war, but the Declaration of Independence, far from having completed serving its purpose became the document whereby we addressed the question as to why we went to all of the trouble in the first place. In the rationale for why we went to war was contained the seed of a new kind of self government. This was a constant question that exists to this day pertaining to what the appropriate relationship of people to government should be. In 1787, as we finally developed what appeared to be a workable plan for government called the Constitution, the debate began that, though it was 222 years ago, sounds eerily familiar today. The Federalists lined up on one side and the Anti-Federalists lined up on the other. The Anti-Federalists were the “states’ righters” of 1787. Their chief spokesman or “pamphleteer” went by the handle - dare I say username? - “Brutus.” James Madison, Alexander Hamilton, and John Jay were the chief spokesmen for the Federalists in their numerous issues of the Federalist Papers. If we could somehow see a film of these lively debates we would not doubt see Brutus warning of the dire consequences of allowing there to be a strong central government with any powers whatever to supersede the authority of the individual sovereign states. By the same token, the Federalists would be seen as being apologists for a strong effective central government which would share certain powers with the states. Brutus also expressed misgivings with regard to what he saw as a Supreme Court without sufficient checks on its authority. All of these arguments then as now centered on the relationship of the people to their government.

The heated debates of yesteryear are only slightly different than their modern version. Representative government born out of the Declaration of Independence spawned tens of thousands of representative bodies at the national, state, and local levels of American government. Thus, we all participate in our unique concept of “Federal” government. At this very hour in Washington, Mississippi, and in numerous local governments large and small these representative bodies are debating with great philosophical earnestness those measures that they believe are in the “people’s interest”. No doubt the words of Brutus and the authors of the Federalist Papers continue to echo down through the annals of time. We pause to honor those who in great peril wrote the Declaration of Independence, those who have defended with their blood and their lives, those who daily exercise its meaning in debate regarding “the good of the people,” and all of us who utter a word of thanks for the right to continue the debate.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

WILLIAM MARTIN WISEMAN, Ph.D

William Martin Wiseman is Director of the John C. Stennis Institute of Government and Professor of Political Science at Mississippi State University. He received his Ph.D in 1986, his MPPA in 1980, his MS in 1974, and his BA in 1973, all awarded from Mississippi State University. In addition to his duties at Mississippi State, Dr. Wiseman is a guest professor at Jackson State University. Dr. Wiseman's areas of academic interest include American government, intergovernmental relations and federalism, county and municipal management, public personnel administration, and innovations in state and local government management.

Wiseman is a sought-after speaker on state and local government, state and local politics, political theory and rural development. Often a guest editorial writer in Mississippi daily and weekly newspapers, he can also be relied upon to evaluate federal, state and local election results for all media.

He is married to the former Bonnie Parker, and they have two children. He is active in the United Methodist Church.

Dr. Wiseman's email is marty@sig.msstate.edu.

ABOUT THE INSTITUTE:

Elected to the United States Senate in 1947 with the promise to "plow a straight furrow to the end of the row," John C. Stennis recognized the need for an organization to assist governments with a wide range of issues and to better equip citizens to participate in the political process. In 1976, Senator Stennis set the mission parameters and ushered in the development of a policy research and assistance institute which was to bear his name as an acknowledgment of his service to the people of Mississippi.

Mississippi State
UNIVERSITY

Mississippi State University does not discriminate on the basis of race, color, religion, national origin, sex, age, disability, sexual orientation, group affiliation, or veteran status.