THE HAND OF PROVIDENCE

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It was the evening of December 24, 1776, Christmas Eve. Things were looking rather bleak for General George Washington and the Continental Army. Washington was undoubtedly asking himself as to just how things had come to this. His army was demoralized; the relevantly new American Revolution had suffered several defeats; the enlistment of a majority of his troops were scheduled to expire at the end of the month; and the British were confident that the rebellion was on the verge of being crushed in its infancy. Washington knew that something must be done; and quickly.

The Colonists had already undergone nearly a decade of frustration in trying to deal with its British masters. The British had completed their costly French and Indian Wars in 1763 and British troops remained garrisoned in America. Prior to the wars, taxes were imposed on the colonies only after consulting with their individual parliaments. Afterwards, taxes were levied with only the British parliament consenting. Heavy taxes were imposed on the Colonists by the British Parliament to pay for both. Resentment was building over the issue of taxation without representation and several other grievances. The Stamp Act of 1765 was burdensome and most irritating to the colonists. . Multiple petitions presented by the Colonists to the King seeking redress of these and other issues were ignored. The Boston Massacre and Boston Tea Party had already occurred. The building tide of unrest and open rebellion was in the wind.

In April of 1775, British General Thomas Gage, aware of the building tension and scattered acts of rebellion, sent his troops to the Massachusetts towns of Lexington and Concord to seize the Colonists stockpiled military assets and to arrest opposition leaders, Samuel Adams and John Hancock. It was the famous ride of Paul Revere and others who warned the Colonists of the pending British actions; allowing the Colonists time to muster an opposition force to meet them. The “Shot heard round the world” was fired when the British arrived and the American Revolution was on.

Initially, the Colonists realized some success in their campaigns. On June 14, 1775, the Second Continental Congress established the First Continental Army and unanimously appointed George Washington as its commander-in-chief the following day where he served without compensation throughout the war. They had the British troops bottled up in Boston. The Colonists had also taken over by force British Ft. Ticonderoga and Ft. Crown Point in New York, gaining valuable military supplies in the process. In January 1776, Thomas Paine published his pamphlet “Common Sense”, which argued for open rebellion and persuaded a majority of public sentiment to agree. In March of that year, the Americans caused the British troops to relinquish its control over Boston. In June of 1776, the battle of Bunker Hill was fought. Although the British won the ultimate battle, it cost them heavy casualties.

In response, in June and July of 1776, the British began to amass in New York harbor the largest joint naval and army force ever assembled and unmatched until D-Day of W.W. II. It included over 300 British ships and 32,000 British troops; twice that of the Colonists. Just five of the British war ships contained more firepower than the entire American militia force. On July 4th, 1776, the Second Continental Congress adopted and ratified the Declaration of Independence, which formerly declared in writing its separation from Brittan and established the 13 separate colonies as independent states and a newly independent nation that would become known as the United States of America. Shortly thereafter, things started downhill for the newly formed nation and its army.

The British troops defeated the Continental Army at both Long Island and Manhattan in New York, causing the Americans to retreat across the Hudson River into New Jersey. The British captured Forts Washington and Lee, which were strategic military points on opposite sides of the Hudson; essentially cutting the colonies into two separate parts; north and south. British troops then chased the Americans out of New Jersey, forcing them to retreat across the Delaware River into Pennsylvania; which is where this story began.

Knowing that something bold had to take place to turn things around, on the eve of December 25, 1776, Christmas Day, Washington made a daring move and ordered his troops to re-cross the Delaware River in flatboats to capture the Hessian garrison at Trenton, New Jersey. The river was raging and choked with ice. The weather was miserable; with high winds and sleet and snow pelting down. The American troops were divided into four groups and crossed at different places. Only the group led **by Washington, consisting of about 2,500 troops, successfully made the crossing and landed about nine** miles north of Trenton. A large number of Washington’s troops had to march through the snow to Trenton without the benefit of shoes.

The Americans made a surprise attack on the Hessian garrison on the morning of December 26, and after fierce fighting, the Hessian commander was killed and about 900 Hessian troops were captured. Washington’s troops only suffered 4 killed and 8 wounded. The city of Trenton was recaptured by the Americans.

Because of the in climate weather conditions, Washington did not press the attack further, but re-crossed the Delaware River back into Pennsylvania with his captives. The news of this American victory spread quickly through the colonies and reinvigorated the flagging spirit of the Revolution. With newly found confidence, the Continental Army re-crossed the Delaware River and retook Trenton on January 2 and captured the New Jersey city of Princeton the next day. Many historians designate this time period to be a decisive turning point in the Revolutionary War that galvanized Colonial support for the war effort and sent shock waves through the British Empire. It also drew the Americans favorable attention from the future allies of France, Holland and Spain.

Just what was it that sustained George Washington through these times and several difficult circumstances of his life? His father died when he was ten years old. He was raised by his older brother who also died at a young age. He became a successful, self-taught surveyor without the benefit of formal education, using algebra, geometry, and trigonometry in the process. He adopted and raised his step-children, children of his wife, Martha who he was married to for 40 years, from her former marriage. He adopted and raised some of his grandchildren when their father died and their mother abandoned them to remarry. He became wealthy, owning and operating a 60,000 acre estate during a time period in which his famous contemporary, Thomas Jefferson, went bankrupt. He was elected to public office at age 17 and held several public offices over the years; including being twice elected unanimously to the presidency of the United States and turned down a third term. He demonstrated great military prowess in several military campaigns and defeated the greatest military power on earth of the powerful British Empire. He had two horses shot out from under him and suffered several bullet holes in his clothing, but never received any wounds in battle. He oversaw the process that resulted in the formation of the United States Constitution. He owned and freed over 300 slaves and provided medical benefits and a pension for the older ones and provided money and assistance to those in need in his area. He provided for and cared for his mother all her life who lived nearly as long as George. Thomas Jefferson referred to him “as close to perfection as a human being can be” and said “his judgement was never wrong”. His defeated enemy, King George III of England called him “the greatest man who ever lived”.

There has been much discussion and misinformation about the Founding Fathers as to whether they were Deists or theists. Prior to the 17th century, those words were used interchangeably. Then they began to separate into two different philosophies. They both believed in a supreme, sovereign being that was a separate individual from that of nature and was the Creator of all things. Deists believed that, after creating all things, God endowed man with self-sustaining, self-acting powers and then abandoned man to his own devices without any revealed Divine Will or oral or written Word of instruction. They believed God did not thereafter intervene at any time on anyone’s behalf. The Theists believed in Divine revelation from God in the form of His written word and that all would face a final judgement before God upon their death. The vast majority of Founders were Theists.

Washington was a Theist. Indeed, he believed in Providentialism; a form of pre-destination believing in the absolute sovereignty of God in all things. He made reference to his belief in many of his writings, including a letter to his friend, Joseph Reed, in which he attributed his ability to persevere in the face of insurmountable odds to “the finger of Providence”.

In his first inaugural address he said, “No people can be bound to acknowledge and adore the invisible hand, which conducts the affairs of man, more than the people of the United States. Every step, by which they have advanced to the character of an independent nation, seems to have been distinguished by some token of providential agency.”

Although Washington was clearly a believer and was guided by biblical principles in the conduct of his affairs, what about the other so called “Founders” and their beliefs that guided them to the founding of this nation?

50 of the 55 framers of the United States constitution were Christian or at least were strongly influenced by it. In their writings, the bible was the most often quoted writing. The major documents written to form the founding of this nation were heavily influenced by Biblical principles. So; did they believe in the doctrine of separation of church and state we hear so much about today? The answer is both “yes” and “no”.

The Puritans or Pilgrims as we refer to them did not come to America solely for religious freedom as we so often hear. Prior to coming to America on the Mayflower, they lived in Holland for several years where they enjoyed religious freedom that they had not known in England. According to the Mayflower compact, a rudimentary constitution they created on the trip across the Atlantic said that one of their main purposes was “for the glory of God and the advancement of the Christian faith”. But other colonists came for other reasons such as economic opportunity.

The State of Connecticut produced the first state constitution in 1639 called “The Fundamental Orders of Connecticut” whose basic precepts were based on Biblical principles. It served as a model for the later United States Constitution. John Winthrop, first governor of Massachusetts referred to America as a “shining city on a hill”, a reference to the teaching of Jesus about being salt and light in His Sermon On The Mount; see Mt. 5:14. Founder and educator Noah Webster, said, “The moral principles and precepts contained within the Scriptures ought to form the basis of all civil constitutions and laws. All the miseries and evils from which men suffer from; vice, crime, ambition, injustice, oppression, slavery, and war proceed from their despising or neglecting the precepts contained within the bible.” All 50 current state constitutions make reference to God in one form or another.

The Declaration of Independence was based on three basic Biblical principles; God, liberty, and justice. The opening paragraph makes reference to “the laws of nature and nature’s God”; a clear reference in the vernacular of the time to God. In the Phrase, “We hold these truths to be self- evident, that all men are created equal; endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable right. Among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.” Appear several Biblical principles. It acknowledges the existence of God, referring to Him as the “Creator”; Gn. 1:1; Ps 14:1; Ps 53:1. The idea of all men being created equal is from Genesis 1:27, “Let us make man in our own image.” In the eyes of God we are all equal. The concept of “equal” means equal in opportunity, not outcomes. The concept that we are endowed with “unalienable rights” denotes that our rights come from God, not government as most nations believed at that time and do still today. It understood that rights given by God cannot be taken away, but those given by government can. It was this latter idea that formed the basis of our government; rights given by God that are to be protected by government and whose power is deferred to them by the people they govern, not visa- versa. That concept is from the Bible, Lk 22:24-30 and other places where Jesus said that if a person wants to lead, he must learn to serve. Thus, the basis of our constitution; power given by “WE THE PEOPLE …” to a government with limited, enumerated powers that are there to serve and protect the people and their God-given rights.

Indeed; these concepts were then carried over to form the basis of our Constitution. The concept of “checks and balances” is also based on a Biblical principle; the depraved heart of man, a concept (doctrine of original sin) vigorously promoted by John Calvin who was a great influence on the framers of the Constitution. Man is born in a sinful condition and cannot be trusted with absolute power. Thus we have the concept of powers distributed among three branches of government; the executive, legislative, and judicial branches, all based on Isaiah 33:22 “The Lord is our judge, our lawgiver, our king”. The ultimate check and balance was always intended by the founders to be “WE THE PEOPLE” who were guided by Biblical precepts.

To further drive home the point, the states insisted on a “Bill of Rights” (the first ten amendments to the Constitution) that set forth, after setting out the powers of each branch of government, the rights of the people that government can not interfere with and must protect. The concept of a powerful, centralized government was the antithesis of the very premise of the Constitution. It is no mistake that the First Amendment contains the unalienable rights of “freedom of religion”, “freedom of speech”, and “freedom of the press”. The framers of the Constitution intended that religion would be a guiding force of government, through the people, who could express their views about government through freedom of speech and a free press to act as the ultimate check and balance on the three branches of government. The 9th and 10th Amendments further clarify that the power of the federal government is limited and enumerated, and that if not clearly enumerated, the power remains with the individual states and/or the people; a concept called “federalism”. It is also no mistake that the Second Amendment is the “right to bear arms”. It is there so the people would have a way to defend themselves from an out-of-control government who grossly infringes upon the God-given rights of the people; not for the purpose of hunting as some current politicians would have you believe.

So, just what was the intent of the founders and the framers of the constitution concerning “separation of church and state”? Well; it is first important to point out that such language does not appear in the Constitution. Second; it is important to say that that concept, the way it is applied today, did not appear in American jurisprudence until 1947 in the United States Court case Everson v. Board of Education.

The Founders and the framers certainly did not promote a theocracy. Indeed, that is in part why they left England in order to escape the intertwining of the British government and the Church of England; a state established church. So, to that extent, they did believe in a separation of church and state. However, what they did not believe in was the concept that religion has no role in government. Indeed, they believed that the two should work in tandem, with the church providing the sacred moral code upon which the people would conduct their lives and use those principles to keep government on the straight and narrow. It was a concept of “freedom of religion” which believes that religion is a part of all of life, including politics and government, and not a concept of “freedom of worship” which our current president has called it on more than one occasion which believes that people are free to worship within the confines of their own church and/or homes, but do not try to bring those principles into the public square. It was based on the Biblical model established by Moses as set forth in Ex. 18 during the Exodus which picked leaders from among the people who were “wise” in godly precepts and have them lead ever-increasingly larger groups to “teach them what they should know” (the sacred moral code) and solve problems at the lowest possible level closest to the people involved. Only large problems that affected the people as a whole would be brought up to the highest levels for resolution. Indeed, it was the concept that the people would exercise self-control based on their internalized sacred moral code to police themselves and not rely on government to do that for them; the true basis of a free people.

The Founders and framers understood this biblical concept and knew that religion was necessary in order for a government based on limited government powers and the ultimate power being vested in the people to work. Many founders said it in many ways, but John Adams summarized it this way, “Our Constitution is made only for a moral and religious people; it is wholly inadequate for the governance of any other.” John Jay, first chief justice of the United States Supreme court said that God had given the right to the people to choose their own leaders and it was the duty of the people to select Christian leaders. If there was an absolute separation of church and state as practiced today, the original framers of the Constitution apparently were not aware of it.

In 1777 the Congress of the United States passed legislation authorizing the expenditure of $300,000 to purchase Bibles to be distributed throughout the thirteen colonies. In 1782 they passed legislation recommending that the Holy Bible be taught in all public schools. It was as late as 1892, in a well- researched Supreme Court decision of Church of the Holy Trinity v. The United States that the Court found that America was a Christian nation founded on Judeo-Christian values.

Proverbs 22:28 says, “Do not move the ancient boundaries your Fathers have set.” As a nation, we have moved the boundaries our forefathers set for us based on their experience and Biblical wisdom. George Santayana, 19th/20th century philosopher and essayist, said, “Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it”.

Unfortunately, in the early 1900’s the reversal of the original constitutional concepts began to take place and the rise in the power of the federal government began. Not by revolution but by evolution. The framers knew that the power to tax was the power of control over those taxed. The federal income tax, which was discussed and rejected in the original constitutional debates and again after the Constitution was passed, resulting in what was known as the “Whiskey Rebellion” and again after the end of the Civil War, began in 1913 as the 16th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution at a rate of 7% and a promise that it would never go higher than single digits; a promise that lasted four years. Sounds similar to a recent promise we all heard, “if you like your doctor you can keep him; if you like your insurance you can keep it”.

In 1947, in the case of Everson v. Board of Education, the United States Supreme Court introduced the concept of “separation of church and state” as it is practiced today based on a letter written by then President Thomas Jefferson to the Danbury, CN Baptist Association and used the words “wall of separation of church and state”. Never mind that Jefferson was not present in the United States during the Constitutional Convention at which the Constitution was drafted, including the First amendment. And, never mind that his letter was never intended to offer his opinion on Constitutional interpretation, but only to ensure a constituent that there would be no state established church like there was in England. However, from that point on, the influence of God upon the governance of this nation began to wane and the power of the federal government began to wax to the point we have now of an uber presidency where the president has taken the position, if Congress will not act in a way he approves, he will use his phone and pen to issue executive orders and simply bypass them. So we now have a president and court that legislates and a legislature who is supposed to be the voice of “WE THE PEOPLE” that virtually do nothing and the checks and balances are gone. Legislation that is passed by a majority of the peoples’ representatives is struck down by the courts and the president decides which laws he will or will not enforce or simply change on his own. We have come full circle back to the very thing that our Founders rebelled against in the first place! Not only do we have taxation without representation, we now have legislation without representation; the very thing the founders were concerned about when listing their 27 grievances in the Declaration of Independence.

In the 1960’s, Senator William Fulbright, democrat from Arkansas and chairman of the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, referred to the Constitution as being “outmoded” and “antiquated”. He said that it “hobbled” the president, who he said was our moral leader, from doing what he knew was best for us. In 2010, when the Republicans regained a majority in the House of Representatives, the opening session of the House began with a reading of the constitution. One Representative referred to that as “a waste of time”. In2014, 7th circuit court of appeals judge, Richard Posner, stated in a court opinion that the text of the U.S. Constitution was largely irrelevant. He went on to say that it was nonsense to believe that a 21st century society could be governed by a document authored by 18th and 19th century authors. Recently, in the aftermath of a mass shooting at a nightclub in Orlando, Florida, Democratic Sen. Joe Manchin, in an interview with MSNBC said in regard to difficulties in passing gun control legislation he believed that “due process guaranteed under the Fifth Amendment to the Constitution was killing us”. He supported an idea that instead of upholding the Second Amendment right of an individual to bear arms, if the government deemed a person to be “suspicious” they should be denied the right to purchase a firearm for five years until they can prove they have acceptable behavior. In other words, guilty until proven innocent; which is the standard for most all administrative agencies where you are ten times more likely to end up than in a court of law. Yes Sen. Machin, “due process” as guaranteed by the Constitution is hard, just as the framers intended it to be in order to avoid government abuse of people unalienable rights we were endowed with by our Creator. Our leaders seem to have forgotten that the U.S. Constitution is based on a set of immutable principles not ever-changing policies that are subject to the political winds.

Also in the 1960’s the United States Supreme Court began what many would call judicial activism. The court took the Fourteenth Amendment to the Constitution that was passed shortly after the end of the Civil War to protect the rights of the newly freed slaves and began using it to impose the will of the federal government on the individual states. It was a view of the Constitution as a “living, dynamic” document that changed with the views of society as opposed to viewing it in its “original intent”. As a result, it became unconstitutional to pray in public schools, to legislate against abortion, or to deny same-sex marriages. It was no longer a government of limited and enumerated powers but one that could find “implied rights” in the Constitution. That has resulted in over 55 million abortions; the increase in violence, drugs, and immorality in our public schools; and a view of marriage that did not exist in Western Culture for over 5,000 years of recorded history. Even our President, Vice-president, and former Secretary of State now presidential candidate believed the latter until they didn’t. The Founders warned against what they called a tyranny of the judiciary.

We have also lost our sacred moral code based on Judeo-Christian values and replaced them with secular, situational ethics in which everything is relative. Gone are the absolute values established by God, which have been replaced with the ever changing values of man. No more unalienable rights with which we were endowed by our Creator, but rights given by those with the political power that can be given or taken away at their will. The government giveth; the government taketh away; blessed be the name of government!

In Genesis chapter 3 we read of the account of the fall of mankind. Standing at the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, Satan presented Adam and Eve with a choice; who is in control of your lives? Are you going to allow God to tell you what is right and wrong or are you going to make that decision for yourselves? We know the consequences of their decision.

Thomas Jefferson said, “I tremble for my country when I reflect that God is just; that His justice cannot sleep forever.” We as a nation are standing in front of that same tree faced with the same decision; who is going to decide right and wrong for us, God or the government? And we know the consequences of that decision. As a result, we can no longer even agree on what constitutes a marriage or whether gender identity is biological or an individual preference de jour. And, if you do not support the politically correct answer to those questions, you will be punished by either government or the self-appointed societal elite. Up has become down and left has become right. Our federal government now seems unable to distinguish between a president of a republic and a monarchy; between statesmanship and showmanship; unable to distinguish between a terrorist armed with a weapon and a lawful citizen exercising his or her second amendment rights; a sovereign nation based on exceptionalism with the right to defend its culture, language, and borders from a world sanctuary for multiculturalism with a moral equivalency among all cultures and philosophies; between the needs of a foreign war refugee who does not intend to assimilate into the American ideals and the American veterans who fought and died for those ideals; between a native born or naturalized American citizen and an outsider who kicks down our borders and demands we capitulate to his or her native culture and tongue; between a sacred moral code based on Judeo-Christian values and a secular code of conduct that was once practiced in the darkness of a back alley instead of main street as it is today. As stated in romans 1:22 professing themselves to be wise, they became fools.”

And it is not just our leaders that have changed. The values of the American people themselves are changing as well. In 2015, the Pew Research Center found that, in the last eight years, the number of Americans identifying themselves as Christian has dropped from 78% to 70% and those considering themselves non-religious or non-affiliated grew by 6%.

The Barna Group found in a 2016 study that 90% of non-affiliated Americans are expressing concern about what they call religious extremism and over 50% view Christianity as extremism. Things such as using your religious beliefs to refuse offering services to anyone or demonstrating outside an organization that one considers to be engaging in immoral activity or opposing government policy that conflicts with your religious beliefs is viewed as extremism. Although 80% express concern over the nation’s moral condition, 66% think morality is a situational circumstance and 75% of Millennials hold that view. Even more alarming is that 41% of self-identified Christians hold that same view. In other words, we have become just like the Children of Israel as noted in Judges 21:25 “everyone did what seemed right in his own eyes”.

Our own Federal Department of Homeland Security considers organizations which promote themes such as constitutionalism, patriotism, the Second Amendment, limited government, traditional marriage, or the second coming of Jesus Christ to be extremists. They have made public statements to the effect that they consider domestic terrorism more of a threat than foreign terrorism. Under these criteria, our own Founding Fathers would be considered terrorists.

We seem to have developed a new moral code that no longer follows the Biblical standards! We have moved from a Christian nation to a post-Christian nation to a neo-pagan one.

So is it too late to reverse the course in America? I think not; but only if we re-invite God back into the public square. Only if we acknowledge that the solutions to America’s problems lies not in the Halls of Congress but in the House of God.

As stated by well- known W.W. II radio correspondent and journalist, Edward R. Murrow, “a nation of sheep leads to a government of wolves.” Or, as stated by the 18th century philosopher and author and member of the British parliament, Edmund Burke, “all that is necessary for evil to triumph is for good men to do nothing.” Or as stated by former president of the United States, Ronald Reagan, concerning this philosophical war, “but if we lose this war, and in doing so lose this way of freedom of ours, history will record with the greatest of astonishment that those who had the most to lose did the least to prevent its happening.” Reagan also reminded us that, from time-to-time we have been tempted to believe that our society has become too complex to be managed by self-rule and that a government by an elite group is superior to a government for, by, and of the people. But he asked, if no one among us is capable of governing himself, then who among us has the capacity to govern someone else?

Jesus called upon us as Christians to be salt and light to the rest of the world. Light illuminates the truth in a sea of darkness. Salt is an irritant, cleanser, and preservative. IN ancient days, roman soldiers were paid in salt, which was considered a valuable commodity because of all its uses. If the salt was no good, it was simply thrown to the ground and trampled underfoot. Jesus said that should be our fate if we do not act like good salt to the surrounding world.

Reagan further said that our nation has prospered in the past because we unleashed the energy and individual genius of our people to a greater extent than any other nation on earth. It was the freedom and the individual dignity we promoted that made all that possible.

We are made in the image of God and we should act like it. We should promote the idea that the rise of this nation is dependent upon the hand of God and our return to His precepts not government that will lift us from our current fallen position. Unlike our president seems to believe that America is not exceptional and has only a moral equivalency of all other nations, we need to see ourselves as a shining city on a hill, illuminating the world with God’s wisdom and freedom of the individual.

As stated by Benjamin Franklin during a particularly difficult time at the Constitutional Convention, “Have we now forgotten that powerful friends, or do we imagine that we no longer need His assistance? I have lived Sir a long time and the longer I live, the more convinced I am of this truth; that God governs in the affairs of man. And if a sparrow cannot fall on the ground without His notice, is it probable that an empire can rise without His aid?” Like General George Washington, we desperately need to return this country to acknowledge the Providence of God.

As the British troops were preparing to march on Lexington and Concord to confiscate arms and arrest leaders of the independence movement, Patrick Henry made an impassioned plea to his fellow colonists, “Is this life so dear or peace so sweet as to be purchased at the price of chains and slavery? Forbid it Almighty God! I know not what course others may take; but as for me, give me liberty or give me death!”

Or as stated by former President Ronald Reagan, “Freedom is never more than one generation away from extinction. We didn’t pass it to our children through the bloodstream. It must be fought for, protected, and handed on to them to do the same. Or one day we will spend our sunset years telling our children and grandchildren what it was once like to live in the United States where men were free.”

As we celebrate this years’ Independence Day on July 4th, let us not forget that we are in a battle just as real as it was in the first revolution. Not a war of bullets and bayonets, but a philosophical one involving a world view, ideals, and the very soul of this nation. We must rise up and be salt and light to the world or risk becoming, as Ronald Reagan said, the ones with the most to lose who did the least to prevent its; mere salt to be trampled underfoot. We owe no less to the cause of Jesus Christ and to our nation then did the original signers of the Declaration of Independence when they said, “we mutually pledge to each other our lives, our fortunes, our sacred honor”.

May God once again bless the United States of America!