

## **The Duties of Democracy: Reflections on a Citizen's Rights and Responsibilities**

Aristotle observed several millennia ago that "the basis of a democratic state is liberty."<sup>1</sup> Our enduring democracy, conceived in liberty and created in opposition to colonial tyranny, has withstood the challenges of centuries of change, becoming the world's oldest model of democratic rule.

America's Founding Fathers, steeped in history's long record of autocratic rulers arrogating power at the expense of their subjects, had the wisdom to enshrine personal freedoms in a living Constitution, a supreme law that ensured the protection of individual, inalienable rights from encroaching governments. "We the people" established a rule of law -- soon perfected with a Bill of Rights -- that created both rights and duties for its citizens, a system that requires separation of powers and checks and balances, all in an effort to preserve and "secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity."<sup>2</sup>

Today, we enjoy an unprecedented range of freedoms not simply because we have a written Constitution outlining limits on the scope of government authority, but, most importantly, because America's citizens believe, like Aristotle, that liberty is the foundation of any democracy. While the words that comprise our Constitution are important in framing our freedoms, ultimately it is the people's responsible exercise of these rights and their continued respect for their obligations to observe the rule of law that make the U.S. Constitution an effective bulwark against improper governmental action.

---

<sup>1</sup> Lord, Carnes. *Aristotle's Politics*. 2nd. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2013. Print.

<sup>2</sup> "The Constitution of the United States," Preamble.

As amended by the Bill of Rights and later post-Civil War amendments, our Constitution enumerates rights and liberties by limiting the powers of government. The First Amendment specifically prohibits government from any actions that would infringe on the freedom of speech, freedom of religion, freedom of the press and freedom to assemble and petition. For example, the fundamental right to free expression enables individuals to question and challenge their government's actions without fear of prosecution or imprisonment. This unfettered right to criticize authority is essential to a limited, democratic government, where citizens are encouraged to combat corruption or abuse of power with the knowledge that their personal liberties will not be denied in response.

Still, this important right to freely speak one's mind, to print one's thoughts, to practice one's beliefs and to join others in petitioning one's government, carries with it the equally critical duty as a citizen to employ one's freedom of expression to challenge unlawful government acts and press one's fellow citizens to action when fairness and equality under the law are denied. Indeed, the former Soviet Union had a detailed written constitution that ostensibly protected personal freedoms, but only when its citizens actively organized to oppose the state's totalitarian tactics did some semblance of freedom become available in practice.

Similarly, despite the Constitution's clear promise of equal protection and due process under the Fourth and Fifth Amendments, only with later adoption of the Reconstruction Amendments, a bloody Civil War, momentous Civil Rights protests and passage of new Civil Rights and Voting Rights laws, was the promise fulfilled for millions of Americans. Realization of Martin Luther King's long-dormant dream of

equality for all again required America's citizens to assume the ultimate responsibility for ensuring that the words of their Constitution were more than hollow promises, realizing that rights wrongfully denied to some inevitably deny them to all.

Recent concerns about government data collection and the limits of privacy also require citizens to be vigilant about the extent of official surveillance. As new threats arise, citizens must take responsibility to help carefully balance government security efforts with the evolving right to privacy. Fortunately, our amendable Constitution allows for the flexibility to fashion new rules and modern parameters for privacy that still respect individual as well as group expectations of freedom from intrusive state surveillance. Indeed, the current privacy debate presents an especially critical role for citizens, requiring them to know their fundamental rights as they take responsibility for shaping the rules that will define their future rights and responsibilities in a wired world.

As the great grandson of immigrants who fled Europe's autocratic rulers for America's promise of liberty and whose sons later fought in Europe and the Pacific to preserve their newfound freedoms, the Constitution's rights and responsibilities hold special significance for my family. I recall from my youngest years, proudly joining my parents and grandparents in the local voting booth as they cast their ballots and demonstrated how much they cherished their right to choose their own representatives without interference or fear of retribution. My family also underscored for me the importance of an informed electorate, one alert to the issues and willing to engage in responsible public debate over options to address concerns. For my family, civic duty entails raising probing questions and discussing the issues of the day over the dinner table, a forum where respect for differences of opinion and new ideas always lead to

exciting conversations. While I admit I do not always have ready answers to every pressing problem, I was taught the value of sharing varied views and exploring ideas in open and honest dialogue with others.

Liberty is never free. The American democratic experiment remains a fragile test of freedom against the threat of tyranny. To endure, it will need to be nurtured with dedication, vigilance, and the unrelenting resolve of its citizens to assume individual responsibility for safeguarding their enviable rights. As William Faulkner presciently observed: “We must be free not because we claim freedom, but because we practice it.”<sup>3</sup>

---

<sup>3</sup> Faulkner, William. *Essays, Speeches & Public Letters*. New York: Random House, Inc., 2004. Print.

## Bibliography

- Academic Solutions, Inc. *The United States Constitution Study Guide*. Academic Solutions, Inc., 2003.
- Baker, Peter, and David Sanger. "Obama Calls Surveillance Programs Legal and Limited." *New York Times*. (2013): n. page. Print.
- Currie, David P. *The Constitution of the United States: A Primer for the People*. University of Chicago Press, 2000.
- Faulkner, William. *Essays, Speeches & Public Letters*. New York: Random House, Inc., 2004. Print.
- Gershman, Jacob. "NSA's Phone Data Collection Program Lawful, Federal Judge Rules." *Wall Street Journal*. (2013): n. page. Web. 30 Dec. 2013.  
<<http://blogs.wsj.com/law/2013/12/27/nsas-phone-data-collection-program-lawful-federal-judge-rules/?KEYWORDS=nsa+privacy>>.
- Granick, Jennifer, and Christopher Sprigman. "The Criminal N.S.A.." *New York Times*. (2013): n. page. Print. <<http://www.nytimes.com/2013/06/28/opinion/the-criminal-nsa.html>>.
- Lord, Carnes. *Aristotle's Politics*. 2nd. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2013. Print.
- "Preamble to the Constitution." *U.S Constitution*. FindLaw. Web. 30 Dec 2013.  
<<http://constitution.findlaw.com>>.
- "The Constitution of the United States," Amendment 1.
- "The Constitution of the United States," Preamble.