

# *Why There's a Trust Deficit in this Country*

## *Advice the Founding Fathers would give Our Leaders about Power and Trust*

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(Word Count: 977)

Designing a government that could be trusted by its citizenry was foremost in the minds of the framers of our modern republic over two hundred years ago.

Our Founding Fathers were acutely aware of history, to a much greater extent than we today. For them, applying the lessons of the failures of ancient Greece and Rome was paramount to ensure that the formation of the United States did not replicate their fatal flaws.

Tragically we're falling prey to the same fallibilities our Founding Fathers warned of.

### *Weak Link in Ancient Greek Democracy*

Many Greeks became disillusioned when poorly educated people took the reins of power of their democracy. Its weakness was in giving all the power to all the people, potentially sacrificing good government to the rule of the mob<sup>1</sup>. Plato and Socrates strongly advocated elected leaders having a strong moral conscience augmented by an education centered on two essential qualities.

What were those two qualities? Character and Wisdom, valued by the Greeks in a very special way:

- Character was best epitomized by Virtue (arête), Truth (logos), and Honor (timo)
- Wisdom (sophia) was sound judgment derived from deep intellect, a compassionate heart, and the disciplined ability to act in a fair and just manner, all of which were considered far more valuable than Knowledge (gnosis)

### *Jefferson's Purpose for Education*

Thomas Jefferson wrote extensively about imbedding these qualities into a good education, regarding them as essential to the foundation of a great democracy:

Laws will be wisely formed and honestly administered in proportion as those who form and administer them are wise and honest; whence it becomes expedient for promoting the public happiness that those persons whom nature has endowed with genius and virtue should be rendered by liberal education worthy to receive and able to guard the sacred deposit of the rights and liberties of their fellow citizens.<sup>2</sup>

Among the benefits of education [is] the incalculable advantage of training able counselors to administer the affairs of our country in all its departments, legislative, executive and judiciary, and to bear their proper share in the councils of our national government: nothing more than education advancing the prosperity, the power, and the happiness of a nation.<sup>3</sup>

Jefferson's concept of liberal education was very different from what we think of today. Then, education's purpose was to *make better citizens* by focusing on both *character* and *wisdom*. Our modern construct of education has changed its priorities: now it's *competence* and *knowledge*, producing too many graduates who are highly competent Machiavellians.

## *Lessons from The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*

In 1776 the ideals of principled leadership were brought into crystal clarity by Edward Gibbon's publication of *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*.<sup>4</sup> Copies were immediately shipped to America; its lessons readily absorbed by Jefferson, Madison, Franklin, Adams, and Washington.

A realist well acquainted with Machiavelli, Gibbon was also a philosopher and historian with deep ideals: "Human freedom is the first wish of our heart; freedom is the first blessing of our nature." His primary question centered on how so powerful an empire as Rome could fall into ruin. Gibbon was firm in his view that without the qualities of civic virtue and honor, without being committed to good behavior and citizenship, Rome's greatness was destined for peril.

The stoic emperor Marcus Aurelius attempted to revive Greek virtue within the Roman Empire. Gibbon pointed to those profound values as the hallmark of enlightened and principled leadership. After Marcus Aurelius' death, Gibbon asserted, the empire spiraled into ever accelerating decay as civic virtue was perverted by the vices of greed and self interest. Gibbon astutely observed that private character flaws inevitably devolve into public vices. Without ample supply of people with good character, the foundations of liberty and freedom were undermined, resulting in collapse and ultimately, the Dark Ages.<sup>5</sup>

### *Why George Washington was the Most Trusted Man in America*

None of Gibbons' lessons were lost on the Founding Fathers. Aurelius' *Meditations* were widely published; Jefferson was quite fond of them; Washington had practiced stoic philosophy religiously since his youth.<sup>6</sup> His stoic quest focused not on a man's intellect, but his behavior as the visible centerpiece of a progressive human spirit. Wisdom, virtue, self-restraint, and tolerance, along with the ardent display of honor were essential to create trust and prevent the egregious distortion of rationality, morality, and good judgment.

Few in the annals of history have better epitomized these principles in the effective exercise of power than George Washington. As historian Edmund Morgan observed:

Washington's genius lay in his understanding of power: military power, economic power, and political power, an understanding unmatched by that of any of his contemporaries. He was fighting not simply for independence but for an independent republic. He was fighting a people's war, and he knew that he would lose what he was fighting for if he tried to take more power than the people would freely give.

In the end, he believed, the people would do the right thing. Washington's patience in waiting for the people to do the right thing is remarkable. He never sought power on any other terms than those on which he had initially accepted it, as servant of the people. The independence of the republic owed much in the end to the wisdom of men who understood the interests of the people better than their elected representatives.<sup>7</sup>

A government based solely of checks and balances is insufficient to sustain our nation's future. The legitimate use of power requires balancing self interest with the virtues of the greater good; our public servants must be held to a higher standard. An *educated electorate* and *enlightened leadership*, esteeming character and cherishing wisdom, can empower us. It's time to summon from seclusion the insights of our Founding Fathers in restoring trust in government; else the United States of Amnesia becomes another lost democracy. - 30 -

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<sup>1</sup> thus the reliance on a republic of elected leaders

<sup>2</sup> Thomas Jefferson: Diffusion of Knowledge Bill, 1779. FE 2:221, Papers 2:527

<sup>3</sup> Thomas Jefferson: Report for University of Virginia, 1818

<sup>4</sup> Washington owned a copy of the six volume set, which was listed in his library's inventory at the time of his death in 1799.

<sup>5</sup> Coll, Alberto, *The Political Science Reviewer*, Volume XVI, 1986, p 98-100

<sup>6</sup> See Washington, George, *Rules of Civility and Decent Behaviour in Company and Conversation*, published by the Mount Vernon Ladies Association, 1989 and Grizzard, Frank, *The Ways of Providence, Religion & George Washington, Mariner*, 2005, Daily Prayerbook written by George Washington, p 81-116

<sup>7</sup> Morgan, Edmond, *The Genius of George Washington*, Norton, 1980 p 6-25

## Appendix: Other Supportive Quotes by Thomas Jefferson

**"The most effectual means of preventing [the perversion of power into tyranny are] to illuminate, as far as practicable, the minds of the people at large, and more especially to give them knowledge of those facts which history exhibits, that possessed thereby of the experience of other ages and countries, they may be enabled to know ambition under all its shapes, and prompt to exert their natural powers to defeat its purposes." --Thomas Jefferson: Diffusion of Knowledge Bill, 1779. FE 2:221, Papers 2:526**

**"Whenever the people are well-informed, they can be trusted with their own government;... whenever things get so far wrong as to attract their notice, they may be relied on to set them to rights." --Thomas Jefferson to Richard Price, 1789. ME 7:253**

**"[In a republic, according to Montesquieu in *Spirit of the Laws*, IV,ch.5,] 'virtue may be defined as the love of the laws and of our country. As such love requires a constant preference of public to private interest, it is the source of all private virtue; for they are nothing more than this very preference itself... Now a government is like everything else: to preserve it we must love it... Everything, therefore, depends on establishing this love in a republic; and to inspire it ought to be the principal business of education; but the surest way of instilling it into children is for parents to set them an example.'" --Thomas Jefferson: copied into his *Commonplace Book*.**

**"Virtue and talent, which nature has wisely provided for the direction of the interests of society and scattered with equal hand through all its conditions, was deemed essential to a well-ordered republic." --Thomas Jefferson: Autobiography, 1821. MW 1:54**

**"If the Wise be the happy man... he must be virtuous too; for, without virtue, happiness cannot be. This then is the true scope of all academical emulation." --Thomas Jefferson to Amos J. Cook, 1816. ME 14:405**