

Worse, it failed to establish a consistent judiciary.

The Danville News

Robert John Andrews

Thursday, September 12, 2024

“What’s in it for them?”

Word Count: 750

George Washington wasn’t the brightest of the lot. Yet, despite his lack of academic erudition, they still unanimously elected him as president of the Constitutional Convention. What was the purpose of this convention? It had become obvious to the leaders of our new nation that, as a form of government, the Articles of Confederation had proved inadequate, defective, indeed, poisonous. So it was described by the Federalist Papers. The impulses of the fractious states pulled against the interest of a unified country, the kind of country General Washington fought for. It fostered anarchy, risking tyranny. It gave excuse for bickering predatory competition between states rather than collaboration, inviting corruption by foreign interests. It allowed minority voices to overrule the majority, enfeebling the national administration. It couldn’t regulate inter-state or international commerce. It lacked a federal treasury. It relied on unreliable militia rather than a standing army. It served vested interests rather than all persons. Worse, it failed to establish a consistent judiciary.

Our founding fathers decided to debate and draft what the nation required: a central constitution, one that could be amended as needed. If you want to sail onward, it’s hard to do so when anchored. Better is a firm rudder. Or as I like to say, it is more lodestone than cornerstone. The product was the Constitution by which we are governed today. This is what we honor every September 17th, the day when the Convention adopted it and sent it to the states for ratification.

The problem with a prideful gaggle of ambitious geniuses, however, is that each jealously assumes he is absolutely right. Necessary was a wise captain at the helm to steer this crew toward a gestalt consensus. It’s one thing to be smart, another thing to be wise. Wisdom: intelligence and common sense combined with a moral dedication to ‘mishpat.’ Mishpat is a key Hebrew Bible word. Mishpat speaks of justice, balance, trying to get right what we can get right. Things made right.

Think George Washington. George Washington wasn’t the smartest of the founding fathers, and he knew it, surrounded by the likes of Monroe, Madison, Jefferson, and especially by the electrically brilliant Hamilton.

My father-in-law was an engineer for Jersey’s Port Authority, responsible for most of the landfill expansion of Newark Airport. Tom had to work his way through school. Engineers fresh from college would come by and tell the men where to dig. The men didn’t listen to them. When Tom came along and said what was needed to be done, they listened because they knew he knew how to lift a shovel and shore a ditch.

There are smarts and then there are smarts. What good are talented football players bent on showboating if they lack a skilled coach to meld them into a team? How well will a band full of gifted musicians perform if they lack a conductor to combine and direct their abilities?

George Washington wasn’t the smartest of the founding fathers and he knew it. But he was the wisest. He led by moral character, vision, and commitment. We celebrate him as our Cincinnatus, him astounding the world by knowing when to relinquish the levers of power and return to the plough, a

man respectful of the privilege and responsibility of selfless public service. The best leaders always are the best servants. For Presbyterians, the most sacred and honorable calling in our tradition is not to become a pastor but to be a politician, to be a magistrate, to be in government service, to serve and protect the common good of all people.

Ron Chernow wrote that seminal biography about Hamilton. It inspired Lin-Manuel Miranda's engaging musical. Chernow describes how Washington and Hamilton, by working together during the Revolution and later in Washington's administration, brought out the best in each other. Hamilton had the brains, literary brilliance, and genius for administration. Washington had limited formal schooling, never attended college, had trained as a surveyor when an adolescent.

What he lacked in formal schooling, Chernow explained, Washington made up for in steadiness, courage, self-control of his temper, outstanding judgement, sterling character, and a clear sense of purpose. Monroe wrote that "Be assured, [Washington's] influence carried the government." He carried it because of his clear sense of purpose, sterling character, outstanding judgement, self-control of his temper, courage, steadiness. He was a man they could trust.

Can you imagine George Washington walking among his Continental Army, moved by their sacrifice and suffering, and asking: "What's in it for them?"