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On the Interpretation and Effects of Time

Concerning the relationship with the American Constitution and time, does time deprive the government of its veneration, or is time the “silent artillery¹” of society? James Madison’s Federalist 49 and Abraham Lincoln’s Lyceum Address present two contrasting interpretations of the effects of time on the source of power of the government –the people. Madison alleges his writing to focusing on the idea that time will bring stability while refuting Thomas Jefferson’s “Notes on the State of Virginia” concerning the issue of the branches of government overstepping their boundaries. On the other hand, Lincoln devotes his speech to securing the belief that time will only bring destruction. Through the analysis of these historic documents, Abraham Lincoln’s presentation of the Lyceum Address provides a clearer perspective than Federalist 49 on the relations between the time and the American Constitution: time is a “silent — not tangible – “artillery” – weapon of destruction in reference to the Constitution.

In his Lyceum Address, Lincoln asserts his ideas pertaining to the discussion of the American Revolution. He states, “I do not mean to say, that the scenes of the revolution, are now or ever will be entirely forgotten; but that like everything else, they must fade upon the memory of the world, and grow more and more dim by the lapse of time.” With these words, Lincoln portrays that the American Revolution painted a scene of bloodshed in the lives of the colonists and that the battles and the deaths of the revolution directly impacted people, which injected a “living history” – a personal connection – “in every family.” Hence, Lincoln exclaims

¹ Abraham Lincoln’s Lyceum Address- <http://www.abrahamlincolnonline.org/lincoln/speeches/lyceum.htm>

that the people must dissolve the bonds between the sacrificial vision of the dead and the principles for which the revolutionaries fought. When the time of mourning ceases, the attachment and loyalty to the fundamental principles of the Declaration of Independence will shatter due to the broken link between the love and respect for the law of the land and generating power of the government – the people. These are the ideas which propelled the revolutionaries and the Founding Fathers to fight the War of Independence against England and based the Constitution on those principles – it is that the citizens of the United States are obliged to be granted the “unalienable Rights...Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness.”² Therefore, an emphasis is bestowed upon the necessity of the “reverence for the laws” and “reason, cold, calculating, unimpassioned reason” in America. The same idea applies to the Founding Fathers. Death will find the Founding Fathers as they age with time and their memories will fade in the minds of the citizens; in this process, the principles, which the American Constitution engraves in society, will also, fade with the memory of the dying Founders because of the attachment to the Founders and not to the principles of the Constitution. Uncontrollable passions will emerge from the lack of stability, and the nation will be vulnerable to a destructive force from within the country. However, if the American nation is rooted in the “unimpassioned reason,” Lincoln’s “silent artillery” of time will have no effect on America’s relationship with the Constitution because the country will have been built on a firm foundation.

However, it is when the passions of the people overpass their own boundaries that a destructive force – “men of ambition” – will emerge from within the nation. Brutus from Shakespeare’s *Julius Caesar* quotes, “that lowliness is young ambition’s ladder³,” regarding the

² Declaration of Independence- <http://www.ushistory.org/DECLARATION/document/>

³Shakespeare’s *Julius Caesar* http://shakespeare.mit.edu/julius_caesar/julius_caesar.2.1.html

ambition of Julius Caesar rising through the ranks of society as a dictator; the same principle can be applied to the argument of the Lyceum Address. When the government shows a weakness to overturn unjust laws and if the people are unsatisfied with the political institutions, “this mobocratic spirit” is born and even men who abide by the law will turn to a “Caesar” that has climbed “young ambition’s ladder” to lead the people away from the Constitution by applying to the people’s passions – an emotion that with time “will in future be our enemy” – with empty promises causing the break down and destruction of the democratic government through the “attachment” – the trust – of the people to one’s government. The “mobocratic spirit” of “thrown printing presses into rivers,” the murdered editors, or the burnt churches violate the First Amendment⁴ of the Constitution, stimulating a movement to destroy and demote any “attachment” of the people to the American Constitution because it is from these mobs and lawless behavior that the people will lose trust in their government and take matters into their own hands to undermine the power of the government with the rise of a “Caesar”.

It [the “attachment”] is the “bulwark” – the defense wall – “of any government,” and without it, with time of the repetitious acts of the mobs, the people will alienate themselves from the government due to mistrust, and the American political institutions of equality and liberty will perish because the American government is depended on “the capability of a people to govern themselves.” Without the people engaging in the functions of the government, a government who’s Constitution – the framework of the government – derives from the words “We the people⁵,” fails to thrive because a foundation ceases to exist. Even Samuel Adams, a

⁴ First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution- “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances.”

⁵ The U.S. Constitution - <https://www.archives.gov/founding-docs/constitution-transcript>

Founding Father, draws the connection of the viable power of the people in the government and the American Constitution. In a document opposing John C. Calhoun during the “Nullification Crisis” in United States history, Samuel Adams states his syllogism: Since the power of the government rests in the Constitution, and the people have consolidated their authority on the Constitution, the power of the government rests upon the people⁶. The idea of the alienation of the people from the government proposes the theory that will no longer be a common bond of a “friendship” within the States that believe that their government is trustworthy and reliant; however, few may exist, but they will be “too few” and “too weak” to overthrow the bond of a wide and diverse range of mobs and “Caesar’s” that have invaded the country.

Therefore, according to Abraham Lincoln’s Lyceum Address, it can be concluded, that without the stability of time, the institutions of the American political institutions will perish because of the absence of the people’s interest and mistrust in the government due to uncontrolled passions, and the democratic government of the United States will falls unless those passions are substituted for the reverence of laws. This “political religion of the nation” demonstrates the necessity for a binding force of trust in the government that must be established between America and her people to rebuild “the pillars of the temple of liberty” that must be incised into the U.S. Constitution forever and within her people, but they have been destroyed by the passions of the people and the passing of time.

Contrasting with Abraham Lincoln’s Lyceum Address, James Madison’s Federalist 49 persuades its readers that time encourages stability concerning the relationship between the people and the Constitution. However, Thomas Jefferson promotes that in order to preserve the

⁶ Dr. Kehoe- Topics in U.S. History Since 1865- Fall 2016

stability of the government, “a convention is necessary for altering the constitution⁷” when the branches of the government have overstepped their boundaries because the evil of time will integrate the encouragement of encroaching one’s rights if the people decline a convention to alter the Constitution. To counter Jefferson’s “Notes on the States of Virginia,” Madison utilizes the argument that “frequent appeals would...deprive the government of that veneration which time bestows on everything.” Hence, the stability of the government is dissolved, which is a viable component of even the “wisest and freest governments.” If the government installed a new Constitution each time power overstepped its boundaries, the implicit “implication of some defect in the government” is rested upon her people, and a loss of respect and trust for the government prevails. In turn, the Lincolnian idea of a “mobocratic spirit,” enraged by passions, surges through the people and is the cause of financial, social, economic, political, and religious panics throughout the country, deepening the loose faith of the people in their government; long existing traditions will be broken, the continuity of American way of life will be interrupted, and the stability of the nation will perish because the American political system is founded on the concept of traditions.

Unwanted passions, a common theme between the Lyceum Address and Federalist 49, will arise due to the opportunity to change the Constitution and is a “serious objection” to stir and disrupt “the public tranquility by interesting too strongly the public passions.” Madison further explains that the risk of experimenting with the establishment of frequent conventions will endorse the participation of unwanted passions and is “of too ticklish a nature to be unnecessarily multiplied” when the revisions already ingrained in society have formed a nation of virtuous and intelligent people. He reminds the people that engaging public passions in these

⁷ James Madison’s Federalist 49- http://avalon.law.yale.edu/18th_century/fed49.asp

conventions will tarnish tradition and the fluidity of a time of tranquility – a time without conquering powers to infringe the boundaries between the branches of the government and within the interactions of the citizens concerning their rights and duties – between the people and the Constitution and will damage the stability of the revisions of the past.

Furthermore, Madison warns that the outcome of these frequent appeals would fail to answer “the purpose of maintaining the constitutional equilibrium of the government.” With a frequent imbalance of passions in society and the neglect of allowing “that veneration,” – the time for the people to acknowledge and accept the new tradition imposed upon them by the revision in the convention – will not only influence the people to disregard the full significance of these revisions and their contents due to the high frequency of conventions, but the time elapsed between these revisions grants the people an opportunity to accept the established revisions of the law that will be engraved in the new tradition of the American nation as the people obtain “reverence for laws,” and it pursues the demonstration of stability in a government that is necessary for the American people to accept and to respect their Constitution as the “supreme law of the land⁸.”

Signed by 55 delegates in 1787, the United States Constitution has preserved the American people and her country from the dangers of internal and external rebellions and wars leading to a full-scale destruction of the American empire. Throughout the past 250 years, American nationalist ideas, which founded the framework of the new nation and even preceded the crafting of the Constitution, and the practiced law in society implemented by the birth of the American Constitution in 1787, have survived through the tyrannical era of British influence, the

⁸⁸ “The Constitution”- <https://www.whitehouse.gov/1600/constitution>

seven year American Revolutionary War, a division of political thought that divided the nation and led the country into a civil war, and contemporary issues that surround political platforms today. In essence, the Constitution has been amended 17 times between 1791 and 1992,⁹ creating the 27 amendments of the United States Constitution; however, America has lived through the many trials of history and has not encountered the establishment of a new constitution. The past two and a half centuries have illustrated through the writings of Abraham Lincoln's Lyceum Address and James Madison's Federalist 49 that time is both a weapon of destruction and a producer of stability in a society that is rooted in the relationship between her people and her constitution. While Madison supports his claim using abstract concepts like "a nation of philosophers" and the branches of government which the people have minimal concrete contact with these institutions in their daily lives, Lincoln paints the picture of the passions fueling the mobs and its effects on the people; he applies to the emotion of fear of a rising tyrant within the country to spur a movement to install a strong formation of one's respect and reverence for the Constitution. Thus, because of Lincoln's usage of pathos in his speech, the context is easier to comprehend for the American people due to its simplicity and references to situations of the common American man. By analyzing the Lyceum Address and Federalist 49, these documents provide insight into the minds of political analysis of the 21st century who debate on the issue of the relationship of time and the American Constitution.

⁹ "Additional Amendments of the Constitution" - <https://www.billofrightsinstitute.org/founding-documents/additional-amendments/>