

Last week, this column focused on the role of a common shared culture in the history of nations. Countries without a shared culture (language, religion, history and myths), cannot survive for long. Empires, in which many nations or peoples are ruled centrally, such as the Persian and Roman empires, certainly made life better for their subjects. Trade flourished, peace was guaranteed, and as long as the emperors were not monsters, nobody objected. Inevitably, corruption replaced good rule and empires collapsed.

Our Founding Fathers were actually the first people in the world to be creating a nation-state from scratch. They all were products of British society, educated as Englishmen at Oxford and Cambridge. English culture was part of European culture, the part that had been Catholic and then fractured into many cults of Protestantism. All had been inheritors of the culture of ancient Rome, and before that, Greece, and in addition that, Christianity, which began as a cult of ancient Judaism.

The English were the first to question the absolute authority of a king when the nobles revolted against the King and demanded the great charter (Magna Carta) be signed by the king, recognizing the rights of the nobility to certain protections from the King. The creation of a parliament (talking place) extended power of the purse to the merchant class. The British break with the Catholic Church gave them some power over independent religious beliefs. Protestantism gave religious choice to people who formerly had none and it promoted literacy.

The Founding Fathers were not actually starting from scratch, then. But they intended to create a republic, a system of self-rule that had not existed for two-thousand years. They knew is they were to try again to create a republic with the ability to last, they would have to study the ancient models and see where they went wrong.

The 2016 election of Donald Trump spurred Pulitzer Prize winner Thomas E. Ricks to write, *First Principles: What America\222s Founders Learned from the Greeks and Romans and How That Shaped Our Country* (Harper Collins 2020). Ricks did a deep dive into the readings and writings of the founding fathers to see if they anticipated their republic might ever have a rogue president. They did indeed anticipate this, and provided a division of powers to check and balance and prevent abuse.

During the four years in which Ricks wrote this book, we have seen that so far, the Founders were right. We are now seeing the Courts, the Press, and Congress checking the president\222s abuses. Only one check has failed: the Senate, and our common culture as Americans is endangered by an unrelenting attack on truth. A portion of our nation puts more trust in conspiracy theories and a lying president than on the usual sources of truthful information: government, mainstream press, and popular shared news and entertainment media.

Our Founders shared educations based on classical studies: Rome and Greece, both of them providing models of various sorts of government, some more successful than others. George Washington was shaped by the Roman idea of virtue (uprightness and doing the right thing). Adams was the expert in Roman law and unselfish public spirit. Jefferson was influenced by Roman art and architecture and the Greek invention of science. Jefferson created the look of America in all its public buildings and promoted scientific inquiry.

But of all the founders, Madison was the most educated, and devoted four years to reading everything our ancients could teach us, leading to Madison\222s lead on writing the Constitution.

After the founders were gone, the common culture rejected classical studies and gave us instead our perennial underbelly culture that hates intellectuals, is individualistic and selfish, scorns history, and distrusts government. When that segment of our fellow citizens vote, they can give us rogue leaders, which they did in electing Andrew Jackson and Donald Trump. Fortunately, the majority gave us Abraham Lincoln, Teddy and Franklin Roosevelt, and Barack Obama.

George Washington was right: a republic requires virtuous people (those who do the right thing for us all). Virtue, plus Madison\222s checks and balances, can save us.

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