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In Defense of Idealism

Isaiah 6: 8-12; Galatians 5: 13-14

In the late spring of 1777, amidst a war for independence that was not going well, a young man entered Fort Ticonderoga and introduced himself to the commanding officer as his newly-appointed chief engineer. His speech was heavily accented, which the officer found strange, but when he asked the young man what his first suggestion would be for improving the fort's defenses, the young man looked around quickly and said, "I would place my artillery atop that mountain over there."

The commanding officer scoffed, "Such a feat is not only impractical, it is impossible."

He dismissed the young engineer as some strange foreigner, perhaps drawn to this fledgling revolution by high ideals, but too idealistic to prove of much worth in battle.

Of course, when the British forces arrived, their commanding officer took a very different view of the situation. He said, "Where a goat can go, a man can go, and where a man can go, he can drag a gun."

The first thing the British did was haul artillery up Mount Defiance and from that moment Fort Ticonderoga was lost and had to be abandoned. In that moment the Americans realized that their concepts of impractical and impossible had to be redefined. But the reputation of that young foreign engineer was won.

His name was Thaddeus Kosciuszko, born and raised in Poland. He was, indeed, something of an oddity: he was first foreign officer to offer his services to the colonists. But his skills were estimable.

He was well-trained as an engineer and artillery officer. Moreover, he was every inch an idealist.

He was drawn to America by her spirit of freedom, and when he read a copy of the Declaration of Independence he actually wept for joy, because it articulated the ideals that he had come to value.

Here was a document that expressed the yearnings of his heart, ideals for which he was willing to fight and die, liberty, justice, democracy and the pursuit of happiness. After the defeat at Ticonderoga,

he gained the authority to create the defenses that stymied the British in the key battle of Saratoga, a victory that was strategically and politically decisive because it convinced the French to lend their support to the colonists' cause. Kosciuszko eventually engineered an impregnable line of defenses on the Hudson at a key place in New York called West Point, frustrating all British efforts to go through or around it.

Throughout the Revolution he played a pivotal role in the colonists' ultimate victory.

George Washington thanked him by elevating him to the status of general.

He could have rested on his laurels. He had done a great thing with his life.

But once our Revolution was over, he decided that the ideals for which he had fought needed to be implemented in his own country. So he went back to Poland and helped draft what became the second-oldest democratically-approved constitution in history, second only to our own.

His constitution established rights for the serfs and established equality between the middle class and the Polish nobility and declared independence from Russia, which regarded Poland as a satellite state.

These democratic reforms so unsettled and threatened the Russians that they sent a massive armed force to crush the rebellion. For a time, Kosciuszko's crude troops held their own in fierce fighting, before they were eventually overwhelmed and Kosciuszko badly wounded, spending two years in a Russian prison. It was time enough for a lesser man to have surrendered his ideals. But not Kosciuszko.

Upon his release from prison he returned to the United States and resumed a close friendship with Thomas Jefferson, who called Kosciuszko, "The purest son of liberty I have ever known."

Indeed, the General's commitment to freedom for all people was actually more encompassing than Jefferson's, for he drafted a will in which he bequeathed his fortune to Jefferson for the purpose of freeing Jefferson's slaves. He believed in the ideal of liberty for *all*. When Jefferson was elected president Kosciuszko wrote him a powerful letter, urging him to remain true to his principles, saying to him, in essence, especially as president we need you to be an idealist, for ultimately idealists are those who shape the world.

I find Thaddeus Kosciuszko's story fascinating, for it powerfully refutes one of the great lies that the old try to tell the young about life. As G. K. Chesterton once noted, when he was a youngster he heard old men say, 'Ah, when I was younger I held to high ideals, and it is good for the young to do so, but as I aged the accumulation of experiences led me to become a pragmatic man.' Such confessions sounded reasonable, yet Chesterton noted that just the opposite trend happened over the course of his life. The longer he lived, the deeper became his attachment to ideals; what ceased to command his respect were people who surrendered their principles in favor of so-called practical considerations. As a journalist, Chesterton spent a lifetime observing politicians at work and concluded, "As much as I ever did, more than I ever did, I believe in the Liberal Party." But there was a rosy time of innocence when I believed in Liberal politicians." In other words, as Chesterton aged, the more he cherished the value of high principles, even as he became disillusioned with those who sacrificed those high principles in the pursuit of lesser achievements.

Yet "idealism," is a virtue that has lost its positive connotation in our modern age. When we call someone an "idealist," we regard him/her much as that American general regarded Kosciuszko, as someone impractical, devoid of common sense, not fully attuned to the nitty-gritty of reality. Indeed, idealism is seen as something dangerous. An "idealist" is seen as someone committed to a particular point of view, regardless of circumstances, one dedicated to a generally unrealistic perspective, which they are determined to push at all costs, even if it causes disaster.

But think for a moment about the career of the prophet Isaiah. Oh, he was a visionary in the most literal sense of the term: while doing mundane duties in the Temple he senses God's nearness in an ominous, awe-inspiring vision of God sitting upon a throne, attended to by seraphim and cherubim, and one of those seraphim, a winged, snake-like creature with feet, flies down with a hot coal to touch Isaiah's lips to purify him for the role of articulating God's ideals. God then cries out, "Whom shall I send?" Isaiah responds, "Here am I! Send me!" Most people know that story. But what happens next? Isaiah naturally asks, "What is to be my message?" God answers with one of the most sarcastic responses ever recorded: "Tell them to keep on doing what they are doing, entering into foreign alliances that they hope will save their necks; to persist in crafting disingenuous deals with both the Assyrians and Egyptians, trying to play the two superpowers off against one another. Tell them to keep forsaking their assurance in the principles of their God in favor of the promises of pragmatic politicians." An appalled Isaiah cannot help but ask, "How long am I supposed to preach this sermon?" God answers, "Preach it until utter destruction rains down upon your nation, until everyone's homes are crushed, and your way of life is destroyed, and you are all exiled into slavery. Just tell them to stay the course until it leads them to utter disaster."

So Isaiah preached a message urging his people to reclaim their trust in God's justice and judgment,

even as he attacked with searing sarcasm the soothing promises of the nation's politicians. The people, of course, preferred the reassuring platitudes of the politicians to Isaiah's biting commentary. They averted their ears as well as their eyes when idealistic Isaiah, practicing stark realism, walked around naked for three years to symbolize the impending doom that would fall upon Egypt, Judah's secret hope for deliverance. The people called Isaiah a traitor, branded him an Assyrian sympathizer, derided him as a pessimist, dismissed him as an unrealistic idealist. Yet slowly Judah's politicians began to see that only the idealist Isaiah offered them a blueprint for survival. When the region roiled with turmoil, their sister Israel to the north was obliterated, ceasing to be a nation; all the little armies fomenting revolution around them were crushed; and the Egyptian army in whom they had put such faith was annihilated, and their soldiers led away chained and naked into slavery, even as Isaiah had foretold. Only Jerusalem and little Judah were spared catastrophe, because they hearkened to the wisdom of an unsettling, uncompromising idealist.

My point is this: we are rightly afraid of people who possess a singular, narrow, self-serving agenda and single-mindedly foist the template of their agenda upon the world.

They are only going to ruin lives in the process.

But such people are not idealists; they are ideologues.

The difference between an idealist and an ideologue may seem hard to grasp intellectually, yet anyone who has experienced both types knows that the difference in their approach to life and impact upon people is profound.

The ideologue wants reality to be a certain way and is determined to manipulate the world to correspond to a particular narrow vision, no matter how many people get hurt.

An ideologue invariably divides the world into the good and the evil, and the former in his/her mind are free to treat the latter with impunity.

The idealist on the other hand sees reality as shaped by certain universal principles and informed by an eternal truth that is applicable to all, accessible to all, relevant for all, beneficial for all.

The idealist sees the reality of eternal principles as more real than the reality we see before us, for these eternal principles represent reality as it could be, should, and eventually must be.

Adolph Hitler, for example, was an ideologue, believing that the world should be ruled by a race of Aryan supermen, and thus pursuing that agenda with monomaniacal zeal, dividing humanity into the superior and the inferior, believing that the former had the right to exterminate the latter.

Winston Churchill was an idealist, believing that the principles of liberty, democracy, freedom of self-expression for individuals and freedom of self-determination for societies was a way of life for all people.

Adolph Hitler believed that right was defined by what was good for his country, and he committed his nation's resources to arrogating to itself as much power as possible.

Winston Churchill believed that right was defined by those eternal ideals, and called upon his people to embody those ideals as a way of establishing their legitimacy for all nations.

Hitler's forces enslaved; Churchill's charges liberated. Hitler was a nationalist in the worst sense of the word; Churchill was a patriot in the best sense of the word. One was an ideologue, the other an idealist.

Churchill's example provides us with a way to think of how to practice patriotism positively in a multi-cultural world. For there is a proper place for patriotism, rightly understood.

We begin with recognizing that before we are citizens of a certain country, or even citizens of the world, we are first children of God.

As God's children we are called to commit ourselves to lives of virtue, lives characterized by faith, hope, love, prudence, justice, temperance and fortitude. These ideals are not meant to benefit one people,

one culture or one country, but are meant to be a blessing unto all.

Beginning with our passionate commitment to these ideals and their universal relevance and universal benefit for all people, our patriotism takes the form of calling ourselves and our own country to embody these ideals as a way of establishing their legitimacy and power for the whole world.

Our patriotism then, informed by our idealism, gives us the responsibility to critique and criticize our own government when our nation authors behavior that falls short of these universal ideals.

Just this week our nation's Central Intelligence Agency published a document revealing that a generation ago it secretly schemed to assassinate foreign leaders, tested LSD on unwitting citizens, tapped the phones of journalists and spied upon our own citizens who embraced political views at variance with the government's perspective.

It is a shameful document whose only redeeming feature is that there is something redemptive in making a confession of guilt.

But I couldn't help but think back to the turbulent 1970's, when the *New York Times* broke the story that our nation's intelligence agency was gathering information on its own citizens.

People called *The Times* the same thing that Isaiah's people labeled him – *unpatriotic*.

Let us be careful about whom we regard as a patriot, for the true patriot in a situation may be the governmental critic who performs the prophetic function of calling a nation back to its fundamental ideals.

Indeed, I close this morning by offering the observation that often the idealist is the one who proves to be the most pragmatic. I offer the relationship of President Jefferson and General Kosciuszko as a prime example. For you see, Thomas Jefferson feared and opposed the creation of a professional army.

Yet his experience of the American Revolution taught him that the cause of freedom would not have been won without the expertise of the classically-trained French military advisors and the insights of professionals like Kosciuszko. His friendship with Kosciuszko convinced him that a country of liberty and justice could only be secured by establishing a college that trained military officers.

So he signed into being the creation of such a school on the very site where his friend Kosciuszko had developed key fortifications over twenty years before.

That's why, if you visit the U.S. Military Academy at West Point, you will find that the campus features a statue of Thaddeus Kosciuszko overlooking the Hudson.

What are the odds of a man born in Poland in the 18th century casting a lasting influence upon a nation that wasn't even a nation at the time of his birth? Astronomical!

Yet such was the enduring power of his commitment to the ideal of liberty.

What are the odds that an idealistic general's dreams of a democratic Poland would still be remembered two hundred years later? Astronomical!

Yet when Poland became a free nation in 1980, the name of Thaddeus Kosciuszko was upon the lips of every speaker. Such has been the enduring legacy of his commitment to the ideal of liberty.

For idealists are those who ultimately shape the world for good.

As we prepare to celebrate our nation's independence,

may we take this lesson to heart as we commit ourselves to practicing lives of high virtue.

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