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1776 & Egypt

Michael Sean Winters | Jul. 5, 2013 Distinctly Catholic

The Founding Fathers had many ideological sources for their views. They were almost all familiar with the writings of John Locke, Cicero (or ?Tully? as the founding generation often called him), and, most significantly, the fiercely anti-Catholic writings of Bishop Hoadley and Algernon Sidney. These last arch-Whigs have been much on my mind these past few days ? although they are never far from it! ? because one of the principal concerns of the Whigs was the danger posed by a standing army. They imbibed the fear when King James II established one in 1685, but the fear carried across the ocean when the heirs of those who deposed James sent redcoats to Boston.

The achievement of American Independence took more than a vote in the Continental Congress and a fine bit of writing by Thomas Jefferson. The war continued for five more years after the Declaration of Independence was drafted and enacted, and another two before the peace treaty was signed. More than any one battle, more than any debate in Congress, the decision by General George Washington to resign his commission and return home after the war did more than any other single act to prevent the young nation from descending into any kind of dictatorship. It would be another six before the Constitution was ratified giving us the government we have today, a government in which control of the military is under direct civilian control. There was a danger of a coup, in fact if not in form, during the presidency of John Adams, when Alexander Hamilton wished to trade on George Washington?s name to create an army that would control the president, rather than the other way round.

Yesterday, while we celebrated our Independence, the people of Egypt woke up wondering what will come next. It remains unclear, but one thing we do know is that the Egyptian people will not have an experience of failed democracy of the kind that is essential to the building up of democracy. Our American form of government was the product of many errors, most notably the weak structures erected by the Articles of Confederation which governed the nation, or failed to, before the Constitution. Problems of sovereign debt plagued the states in the war and after-war years. Boundary disputes were common and Shays Rebellion attempted to traffic in the idioms of the Revolution but was seen by most people as the kind of mob rule they feared as much as monarchy. The drafters of the Constitution were deeply worried about the emergence of factions, or parties, and sought to craft a system that would frustrate the formation of such parties, a desire that was frustrated almost as soon as the ink was dry on the document. Indeed, it took people a little while to realize that a two-party system could serve as a guarantee of liberty and stability, not a threat to them. A series of steps, half-steps and missteps characterized the early years of the American Republic. We crawled with our democracy before we walked. The project is still imperfect.

It is one of America?s greatest blessings, then and since, that there has never been a coup. The usurpation of political authority by the military may sometimes be necessary. It may have been necessary in Egypt. I will even go so far as to suggest that the presence of an institution with nearly universal respect, willing and capable of protecting a country from falling apart when politics breaks down, can be seen as a blessing, I just wish that institution did not have to have guns. Alas, that is not the world in which we live. President Morsi won an

election and then proceeded to subvert democratic norms, consolidating political power in extra-constitutional ways. He seemed more concerned with that consolidation of power than he did with improving the lives of average Egyptians. Still, how much better if an independent judiciary or a legislature in the hands of the opposition, rather than an independent military, had stepped in to correct whatever abuses Morsi committed. Democracy is more than a voting mechanism. It is a culture, and cultures are not built overnight, and they are built more on the lessons of failures than successes, at least that is what the early history of the U.S. teaches us. A democratic culture requires sources of institutional authority that resist democracy?s inherently destabilizing tendencies, an independent press, and independent judiciary, not only the separation of powers but, most importantly, a sense that power belongs to political actors on loan, temporarily, and in trust. The Egyptian military may have understood that none of those checks on Morsi?s power existed and that either they acted or the country would descend into chaos. It is hard to muster much in the way of sympathy for Morsi who appeared uninterested in reaching out to the opposition to forge a consensus.

So, as we contemplate the blessings of 1776, let us offer a prayer, too, for the people of Egypt, that they will have the benefit of a time of trial and error, that great men and women of the caliber America was blessed with in its early years will rise up to guide the nation but not dictate to it, and that whoever assumes control of this most vital country will find a way to bring stability, improve the lives of the people, and let Egyptians get about the important business of making mistakes they can learn from, and forging, slowly, fitfully, a democratic culture that protects all its citizens and channels their energies, and their politics, into peaceful paths.

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