

IMPRIMIS

Because Ideas Have Consequences

25th
year

755,000 subscribers

Four Points of the Compass: Restoring America's Sense of Direction

Balint Vazsonyi
Director, Center for the American Founding

Balint Vazsonyi's career as a concert pianist spans four decades and as many continents. He fled Hungary following the 1956 uprising and came to the United States. Since then, he has continued to tour internationally.

He has also been a professor of music at Indiana University, dean of music at Miami's New World School of the Arts, and chief executive officer of Telemusic, Inc.

In 1996, as a senior fellow of the Potomac Foundation, he established the Foundation's Center for the American Founding. He currently serves as the director of this

Washington-based think tank.

Dr. Vazsonyi holds a Ph.D. in history, and he writes frequently for such publications as *National Review* and the *Washington Times*, where he has been a regular columnist since 1996. ♣



In this issue, a survivor of Nazism and communism describes the genius of the American constitutional system. His remarks were delivered on the Hillsdale College campus last month in a lecture sponsored by the Department of History and Political Science, the Department of Economics, Business, and Accounting, and the Center for Constructive Alternatives.

In his second Inaugural Address, President Clinton called for a new Constitution. He borrowed language from the Declaration of Independence where, in 1776, Thomas Jefferson presented the argument for a new government. While Mr. Clinton did not refer to the Constitution in so many words, his meaning was clear. "We need a new government for a new century," he proclaimed on January 20, 1997. Unlike our present government, this new government would "give" a number of benefits to the American people.

We at the Center for the American Founding disagree. We believe that our present form of government, as articulated in the Constitution, has brought forth the most successful society in the history of the world. Indeed, the country that was established here more than two centuries ago is one of a kind.

Please note that some of the material in this presentation appeared earlier this year in the Heritage Lectures and the Congressional Record.

America: One of a Kind

No other country exerts its best efforts for the benefit of all mankind. No other country will send its young into war without expectations of territorial gain. No other country invites the men, women, and children of the world to come here and become American—the appellation uniform to all who live here. There is a unique American capacity for success, for strength, for goodness. Yes—the United States of America is one of a kind.

We say “one of a kind” and we think of Shakespeare’s plays, Beethoven’s music, or George Washington’s character. We try hard to analyze them, but the ingredients that make them unique are invisible. In the case of America, the ingredients may be identified easily. They include the rule of law, individual rights, and guaranteed property.

Let us talk about ingredients. If we eat something memorable, we want the recipe. With food, we know without the slightest doubt that the ingredients determine the result. Chocolate ice cream, for example, takes chocolate, cream, and sugar. If, instead, we use ground beef, mustard, and “A.1.” sauce, we scarcely expect chocolate ice cream to be the end product.

The ingredients that have created America as we know it are being gradually replaced. Is it reasonable to expect that the end product will nonetheless remain the same?

Over the past three decades the rule of law has been displaced by the search for “social justice.” Group rights and privilege make a mockery of the constitutional rights of the individual. Where not long ago Americans could feel secure in their right to acquire and hold property, government today is no longer discussing whether—only how *much* of it—to confiscate, and how to redistribute it.

But the greatest variety of assault is launched against our common American identity, that magnet that binds all of us together. Our existence as a nation depends on it because the people of this

country converged, and continue to converge, from every corner of the globe.

Identity is about being similar and being different. Since Nature has made every one of us different, we have to agree about those aspects of our lives that will make us similar. Other nations have a shared history; Americans have successfully substituted a shared belief in, and adherence to, certain principles. Our common language, English, took the place of a uniform culture. In place of a state religion, a Bible-based morality was taken for

granted. If we add to this a certain work ethic, an expectation of competence in one’s field of work (whether it requires splitting the atom or sweeping the floor), a spirit of voluntary cooperation, insistence on choice, and a fierce sense of independence, then we have the ingredients of American identity. *It is these ingredients that distinguish us from other societies, and enable those who sweep the floor today to split the atom tomorrow.*

Today, our nation’s leaders are engaged in choosing a path to pursue. Yet, all along, we have had a path to *follow*. That path is clearly pointed out in the Declaration of

Independence. Our Founders provided a superb road map in the Constitution of the United States. Add to this the guidebook known as the *Federalist Papers* and it is hard to see how we could have lost our bearings—but we have. The unique combination of ingredients we discussed earlier functions as our bearings. They keep us on the path, they help us navigate the road map provided by the Founders. Together, they constitute a kind of compass—the compass in the title of these remarks.

The Rule of Law or Social Justice?

Our compass was calibrated between 1776 and 1791. The rule of law became, and should have remained, our “North Star.” But now we have rule by the *lawmaker*. Every member of the executive and the judiciary has become a potential lawmaker and in most cases uses that potential to the hilt.

Social justice is not a basis for stable society because, unlike the rule of law, it is what anyone says it is on any given day. We need only to move back a few years in time or travel a few thousand miles to find an entirely different definition.

Yet the rule of law was intended to place its fundamental provisions beyond the reach of politics and politicians. Whereas it *confers* legitimacy upon subsequent laws that spring from its eternal well, it *denies* legitimacy to all legislative maneuvers that corrupt its purpose. It holds the makers, executors, and adjudicators of the law accountable at all times. Above all, it demands equal application to every man, woman, and child. Nothing in the history of human societies can match the significance and magnificence of equality before the law.

The aspiration for equality before the law began with the Magna Carta, or even earlier, in the legend of King Arthur's court, where knights sat at a *round* table. Eventually, Thomas Jefferson etched the concept in the minds of freedom-loving people everywhere. But even after those immortal words of the Declaration of Independence had been written, it took most of two centuries before America, land of many miracles, almost made it reality for the first time.

It was not to be. The rule of law came under attack just as it was about to triumph. The attacker displayed the irresistible charm of the temptress, the armament of the enraged avenger, dressed itself in intoxicating clichés, and wore the insignia of the highest institutions of learning. It called itself "social justice."

Social justice is not to be confused with genuine concern for those who suffer, which is a frame of mind, a noble sentiment, a measure of civilization. The search for social justice provides a cover for the destruction of our legal system by setting unattainable goals, by fueling discontent, by insinuating a permanent state of hopelessness.

Social justice is not a basis for stable society because, unlike the rule of law, it is what anyone says it is on any given day. We need only to move back a few years in time or travel a few thousand miles to find an entirely different definition. It is an empty slogan, to be filled by power-hungry political activists so as to enlist the participation of well-intentioned people.

The rule of law and a world according to social justice are mutually exclusive. One cannot have it both ways.

"Thou shalt know the tree by its fruit." The rule of law gave birth to individual rights—in other words, rights vested solely in individuals. Only individuals are capable of having rights, just as only individuals can be free. We say a society is free if the individuals who make up that society are free. For individuals to be free, they must have cer-

tain unalienable rights, and additional rights upon which they have agreed with one another.

Individual Rights or Group Rights?

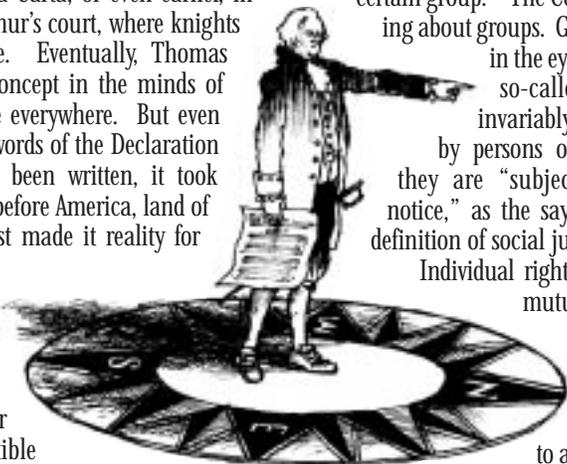
Social justice has spawned an aberration called "group rights." Group rights are the negation of individual rights. Group rights say, in effect, "You cannot and do not have rights as an individual—only as the member of a certain group." The Constitution knows nothing about groups. Groups have no standing in the eyes of the law. And, since so-called group rights are invariably created and conferred by persons of temporary authority, they are "subject to change without notice," as the saying goes, just like the definition of social justice itself.

Individual rights and group rights are mutually exclusive. Once again, one cannot have it both ways.

Among our individual rights, the right to acquire and hold property has a special place. This right protects the weak against the strong and balances inborn gifts with the fruits of sheer diligence and industry. John Locke, Thomas Jefferson, and James Madison held that civilized society is predicated upon the sanctity of private property and that to guarantee it is government's primary function. Without absolute property there is no incentive, no security, no liberty. The freedom to enter into contract, the freedom to keep what is yours, the freedom to dispose of what is yours underlies all liberties.

Neither the search for social justice nor group rights recognizes, or respects, private property. They look upon individuals as faceless members of a multitude who, together, create a certain quantity of goods. These goods belong to what they call the "community." Then certain "wise" people decide who needs what and distribute—actually redistribute—the goods. These wise people came up with the word "entitlement." Entitlements are based neither on law nor on accomplishment. Entitlements are based on membership in a certain group, and we have seen that groups themselves are designated by persons of temporary authority, rather than by law.

The right to property and entitlements through redistribution are mutually exclusive. I repeat: One cannot have it both ways.



American Identity or Multiculturalism?

We have been ordered by the prophets of social justice to replace our common American identity with “multiculturalism.” One cannot fail to notice the enormous importance the leaders of the social justice crowd attach to the eradication of American identity. They insist on bilingual education and multilingual ballots. They remove the founding documents from our schools. They enforce anti-American history standards. They banish the Ten Commandments. Add to this the replacement of American competence with generic “self esteem” and voluntarism with coercion. Consider the vast numbers of new immigrants who are encouraged to ignore the very reasons that brought them to America in the first place. The list goes on, and sooner or later the loss of a common American identity will affect national defense, if it has not done so already.

Will Americans lay down their lives if America is nothing but a patchwork of countless group identities?

Will the armed forces of the United States fight to uphold, defend, and advance multiculturalism?

The questions before us are serious and legion. We are virtually drowning in “issues” that come at us like an octopus. Then, just as we tackle each arm, the octopus turns into a turtle, tucked inside its impenetrable shell. How do we respond? What positions do we take? And, once we figure out our position, how do we argue its merit?

We at the Center for the American Founding propose the “four points of the compass” because we believe that our restored bearings will place us firmly on the path of lasting success once again. After the distortions of the past 30 years, we need to recalibrate our compass to point to the rule of law, individual rights, guaranteed property, and our common American identity.

As you have seen, these are interconnected, and they flow from one another, just as the false compass points that have come to displace them—social justice, group rights, redistribution, and multiculturalism—are interconnected and flow from one another. What is multiculturalism if not a redistribution of our cultural treasury? What is redistribution if not a group right? What is a group right if not the implementation of some political activist’s version of social justice?

For 30 years, we have acquiesced in a steady

erosion of America’s founding principles. The time has come to reverse the process. Rather than contending with countless individual issues, we need to take the debate down a few notches, right to the core. We recommend that future legislative initiatives be tested against the four points of the compass. Does the proposed bill negate the rule of law? Does it violate individual rights? Does it interfere with the guarantee of property? Does it constitute

an assault on our common American identity? Only if the answer to each question is “no” should the proposal proceed and be judged on its merit.

We recommend applying the same test, a “do-no-harm” screen, to existing statutes and regulations. There is much on

the books that ought to be repealed. In other words, let us weed the garden before planting a fresh crop.

Individual rights and group rights are mutually exclusive. Once again, one cannot have it both ways.

Reasserting the Authority of the Constitution

In practical terms, how do we know what the rule of law can and cannot accommodate, and how far do we take individual rights? The answer comes from Article VI of the Constitution: “This Constitution, and the laws of the United States which shall be made in Pursuance thereof. . . shall be the supreme Law of the Land; and the Judges in every State shall be bound thereby. . .” It is as uncomplicated as that.

We are asking the citizens of this great nation and their representatives at all levels to consider the proposed approach. We would like to engage and incorporate the wisdom and experience of Americans everywhere. We do not underrate the magnitude of the step we are proposing, but believe it will make a difference. Through this simple device, it will become clear that one cannot take an oath to uphold the Constitution yet support group rights. One cannot take an oath to uphold the Constitution yet acquiesce in the taking of property without equitable compensation. One cannot take an oath to uphold the Constitution yet support measures that are clearly at odds with the requirements of national defense.

Some suggest that, in 1996, the country voted for bipartisanship. We think the people said: “If you don’t give us a real choice, we won’t give you a real election.” A majority is eager to partake in a real debate about reclaiming our original path versus

Superior Stewardship = Superior Returns

Hillsdale College Gift Annuities

Are you one of the many Hillsdale College supporters who would like to receive guaranteed income in exchange for your gift?

If you are, we suggest you consider a Hillsdale College Gift Annuity. Now is the ideal time to participate, because Hillsdale College recently raised its annuity rates.

For more information,
please call 800/334-8904
and ask for an information packet.

AGE

NEW RATE

50	7.3
55	7.5
60	7.8
65	8.0
70	8.6
75	9.2
80	10.2
85	11.4
90+	12.0

IMPRIMIS (im-pri'-mis), taking its name from the Latin term, "in the first place," is the publication of Hillsdale College. Executive Editor, Ronald L. Trowbridge; Managing Editor, Lissa Roche; Assistant, Patricia A. DuBois. Illustrations by Tom Curtis. The opinions expressed in IMPRIMIS may be, but are not necessarily, the views of Hillsdale College and its External Programs division. Copyright © 1997. Permission to reprint in whole or part is hereby granted, provided a version of the following credit line is used: "Reprinted by permission from IMPRIMIS, the monthly journal of Hillsdale College." **Subscription free upon request.** ISSN 0277-8432. IMPRIMIS trademark registered in U.S. Patent and Trade Office #1563325.

NON-PROFIT ORG.
U.S. POSTAGE
PAID
Hillsdale College

IMPRIMIS

VOLUME 26 • NUMBER 11

FORWARDING AND RETURN POSTAGE GUARANTEED

ADDRESS CORRECTION REQUESTED

POSTMASTER: Send address changes to IMPRIMIS

Hillsdale College

33 East College Street

Hillsdale, Michigan 49242

Do we have your correct address?
Indicate changes here. Or call:
800/437-2268

PRINTED MATTER

N97

HILLSDALE
COLLEGE 