



Characters Welcome in Government Today

By Deborah D. Thornton

A popular cable television channel uses the slogan “Characters Welcome” in promoting its programs. It then shows brief clips of leading characters from current programs in an attempt to encourage you to watch these shows. The idea is that a “character” is someone interesting, someone you want to watch and know more about. In a similar fashion, award-winning American history Professor Gordon S. Wood titled his 2006 book on the Founding Fathers, “Revolutionary Characters.” In it, he details the historical context of the character and actions of eight of our Founding Fathers: George Washington, Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Jefferson, Alexander Hamilton, James Madison, John Adams, Thomas Paine, and Aaron Burr. He makes a conscious link between how their views of character influenced their actions and crafting of our Constitution.

Dr. Wood recently received the American History Book Prize from the New York Historical Society and was named the American History Laureate. In the Introduction to “Characters” he expresses regret that many of today’s historians and academics spend much time vilifying the Founders for everything, from not ending slavery immediately to not implementing women’s right to vote, and defaming them for being “elite white males.”¹ This book helps us to understand the character behind the Founding Fathers’ actions.

I imagine Wood is deeply disappointed with recent studies showing that our college graduates know little about the founding of our country or its early history.² He would also probably be disappointed in the recent report by the National Association of Scholars, showing that the required summer reading for incoming college freshmen is mostly liberally biased contemporary fiction, providing little foundational support for solid academic study or future citizenship by our young people.³

Based on reading “Revolutionary Characters,” many of our Founding Fathers would probably be disappointed in our public and governmental character of today. An important point Wood makes is that the use of “politeness” during the Anglo-American Enlightenment period of the 1700s was a fundamental part of civility. Civility was viewed as the foundation of civilization. Civilization was something to be desired as part of the social process of a community’s development and is the opposite of barbarism and ignorance. During this time there were many books and pamphlets on courtesy and cleanliness, how to behave and dress in public. Dictionaries taught people how to spell correctly. Proper diction, word pronunciation, and standard language use was important. Organizations dedicated to the spread of culture were popular, including lending libraries, concerts, and museums. In America in particular — that wild and unknown place across the ocean — people were anxious to demonstrate their civility and civilization.

Being a “gentleman” was an important part of this process. As defined by Lord Chesterfield, a gentleman is “a man of good behavior, well bred, amiable, high-minded, who knows how to act in any society, in the company of any man.”⁴ In addition to the social aspect, being a gentleman had a moral meaning, was a demonstration of character. According to Wood, this included being reasonable, tolerant, honest, virtuous, candid, unbiased, frank, and sincere. The Founders were very concerned with their character, how their actions and words were viewed. An important reason for their goal of being gentlemen is that most were

A Publication of: **Public Interest Institute at Iowa Wesleyan College**

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first-generation college students, coming from families of modest means. This was the first generation to experience social and economic gain based on their learning and education, instead of their inherited status.

Another idea “being a gentleman” led to is the approach of being “disinterested.” This doesn’t imply that someone was “not interested” in the outcome of a project or plan, but “disinterested” or able to independently evaluate it outside of their own interests. Refraining from corrupt behavior was part of the expectation of disinterest. It was important that being a gentleman, having the desired values, be demonstrated in their public life, that the world saw they were trying to be the best they could be.

As laid out by Wood, the Founding Fathers were, above all, socially and culturally trained to expect that before becoming a political leader one had to be a social leader, or a gentleman. This was true of the Founding Fathers in varying degrees. They all were gentlemen before they became politicians. They did not view politics as a profession, a career, or a place to earn money. Serving one’s country was considered an expected sacrifice for a gentleman, not a way to get rich. George Washington, along with others, refused personal payment for his services to the country.

Contrast that with society of today. Walk down any street in America and you see an amazing array of impolite and uncivil behavior, attire, and manners. Tattered jeans, T-shirts, and flip-flops are the clothing of choice. The language you hear is grammatically incorrect and often filled with four-letter words. Recently, an opinion piece in the *Iowa City Press-Citizen* newspaper decried the behavior of the families and audience at the City High School graduation ceremony, where the horn blowing and cheering often drowned out the names of graduates receiving their diplomas and where many parents were in shorts and T-shirts.⁵

In addition, many of our elected officials have been involved in personal and political scandals in their family lives, their financial dealings, and their political work. These elected officials and government employees are very well paid, receiving substantial retirement and health-care benefits. Recent Presidents and Vice Presidents have left office substantially wealthier than when they entered, often donating little of their income to charity. In the meantime, government spending is out of control, taxes continue to increase, unemployment hovers around ten percent, and political correctness in all things rules the day.

These people are certainly “characters,” but ones I’m not sure the Founding Fathers expected to be walking our streets and running our country on the 4th of July, 2010. As colleges choose their summer reading books, I hope “Revolutionary Characters” is on the list. Our children can learn much from reading it.

(Endnotes)

¹ Gordon S. Wood, *Revolutionary Characters, What Made the Founders Different*, The Penguin Press, New York, NY, 2006, p. 7.

² “The Shaping of the American Mind,” Intercollegiate Studies Institute American Civic Literacy Program, <http://www.americancivilliteracy.org/2010/summary_summary.html> (June 9, 2010).

³ “Beach Books: What Do Colleges Want Students to Read Outside Class?” National Association of Scholars, <http://www.nas.org/documents/Beach_Books.pdf> (June 7, 2010).

⁴ Wood, p. 14.

⁵ “Shame on the Graduation Audience,” *Iowa City Press-Citizen*, June 8, 2010, <<http://www.press-citizen.com/article/20100608/OPINION05/6080317/Shame-on-the-graduation-audience>> (June 8, 2010).

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