

Liber and Public Virtue by Oliver DeMille

A speech delivered by Dr. Oliver DeMille at America's Freedom Festival on June 30, 2000. Dr. DeMille is the author of several books including *Thomas Jefferson Education* and *Leadership*. He is also the cofounder of TJED a leadership education philosophy that teaches parents to nurture a love liberty in the hearts of their children and raise great leaders. Visit www.TJED.org to learn more.

The Liber

On July 4, 1776 John Hancock, as head of the Continental Congress, signed his name at the bottom of the newly written Declaration of Independence and sent it to the world. The rest of the signers didn't sign until Congress reconvened on August 2. So for a month John Hancock's name stood alone declaring independence from the greatest power on the face of the earth.

What motivates a man to voluntarily sacrifice his own safety, jeopardizing his family and all his earthly possessions on the lean hope that his neighbors and nation will support him, and even if they do, that his side has any chance of winning? What motivates a man to voluntarily submit himself to the legal and violent reaction that he knew would come, and which surely did come?

There are two phrases which have been forgotten today, but which help explain why a man like John Hancock, and so many others in his generation, would choose what they did at such high cost. These two phrases were the foundation of freedom on July 4, 1776.

In those days, the average farmer or housewife understood both of these phrases, and based on the response to the Federalist Papers, could have debated and discussed them openly. Unfortunately, in the year 2000, neither phrase is widely understood. The first phrase is public virtue, the second is Liber.

I have submitted these two phrases to thousands of people in seminars around the nation, and I have often stopped at this point in my presentation and asked how many people could give me a definition of Public Virtue or Liber. A few people have known Liber, and in most seminars several people raise their hand and try to define Public Virtue. A few have even come close.

So, what do these phrases mean?

Liber is the Latin word for tree or tree bark, and since tree bark was used to write on and make contracts with and processed to make paper for more writing and contracts, the word Liber can be associated with those who can read, write and engage in contract. With this definition, in the classical world of Greece and Rome, there were two classes of people: slaves and Liber.

There were varying levels and types of slaves and peasants, and likewise different types of Liber: from citizens to merchants to the aristocracy and royalty. But the fundamental difference between slaves and Liber was freedom, and Liber is the root word of Liberty. It is also the root of book, libro, and library.

Liberty is the state of being Liber. Liberty is not just the absence of bondage, but the fitness of the individual to act as a citizen.

Liber is also the root of the phrase “liberal arts”, such as in liberal arts colleges; the arts in a Bachelor of Arts or B.A. degree comes from the liberal arts. The liberal arts are the knowledge and skills necessary to remain free. As Robert M. Hutchins, former president of the University of Chicago, put it: “. . . liberal education . . . is the education that prepares us to be free men. You have to have this education if you . . . are going to be an effective citizen of a democracy; for citizenship requires that . . . you do not leave your duties to be performed by others . . . A free society is composed of freemen. To be free you have to be educated for freedom.”

What are those arts? Well, for the founders they were the arts of reading the classics and thinking clearly and independently.

The Founding generation was a generation of Liber, of men and women and children who could read the law and government bills and resolutions in detail and understand and debate them. These regular farmers and housewives read and hotly debated the Federalist Papers in New York in 1789.

History has proven that Freedom is not free. It must be earned. And one of the ways the Founding generation earned it was in becoming Liber: getting the kind of education required to remain free. And by education they didn’t mean diplomas or degrees, but knowledge gained from reading the classics of history, law, government, and the arts.

It is true that hardly any schools in our day focus on training people to be Liber, but the classics are still available and all we must do is take them off the shelf, dust them off, and get to work earning our freedom. If our generation loses the understanding necessary to remain free, we will lose our freedom. No society in all of history has avoided this inevitable consequence. Over and over in history, when the people of a nation stop being Liber and just become focused on getting jobs and making a living, freedom wanes and finally is sold.

Unless we pay the price to be a nation of Liber, we will not maintain the freedoms we so cherish and celebrate.

That is the first great word that we have forgotten since July 4, 1776—Liber, which means the body of citizens reading the classics and history and knowing what is required to remain free.

Public Virtue

The other forgotten key to maintaining our liberty and prosperity and ability to worship and choose freely is public virtue.

Benjamin Franklin said: “Only a virtuous people are capable of freedom. As nations become more corrupt . . . they have more need of masters.

Samuel Adams said: “I thank God that I have lived to see my country independent and free. She may enjoy her . . . freedom if she will. It depends on her virtue.”

The founding generation spoke of two types of virtue: private virtue and public virtue. Private virtue is morality, obedience to the commandments, doing what is right. And private virtue is essential to freedom: immorality leads inevitably to loss of freedom—personal and eventually national.

Public virtue, on the other hand, is a totally distinct concept from private virtue, though equally vital to liberty. Most of the people in our seminars who try to define public virtue say something like: public virtue is where government officials are moral in their personal lives, or public virtue is when leaders pass moral laws. But public virtue is even more fundamental than these things—it is one of the things which makes them possible.

In 1776 the term public virtue meant voluntarily sacrificing personal benefit for the good of society. Consider the signers of the Declaration of Independence and their closest associates, their wives. The signers and their wives epitomized both Liber and Public Virtue Robert and Mary Morris Like Robert Morris of Pennsylvania.

Robert and Mary Morris

Robert Morris was at a holiday celebration dinner when news came of the Battle of Lexington. The group was astonished and most people soon left for home, but Robert and a “. . . few remained and discussed the great question of American freedom: and there, within that festive hall, did Robert Morris and a few others, by solemn vow, dedicate their lives, their fortunes, and their honor, to the sacred cause of the Revolution.”[i]

Robert Morris was self-educated and guided by a mentor, Mr. Thomas Willing, and became Liber through studying the classics. He started in business at age 21 and became extremely wealthy. In fact, he was known as the Financier of the Revolution. When the Tea Act was passed, Robert Morris openly supported it though he lost thousands of dollars in his business.

When Congress went bankrupt in 1776, Robert Morris loaned \$10,000 of his own money to feed and cloth Washington’s “handful of half-naked, half-famished militia.” In their day, this was a fortune. One historian wrote: “When Congress fled

to Baltimore, on the approach of the British across New Jersey, Mr. Morris, after [fleeing with] his family into the country, returned to, and remained in Philadelphia. Almost in despair, Washington wrote to him, and informed him that to make any successful movement whatever, a considerable sum of money must be had. It was a requirement that seemed almost impossible to meet.

Mr. Morris left his counting-room for his lodgings in utter despondency. On his way he met a wealthy Quaker, and made known his wants. "What security can't thou give me?" asked he. "My note and my honor," promptly replied Mr. Morris. The Quaker replied: "Robert, thou shalt have it." – It was sent to Washington, the Delaware was crossed [remember the picture with Washington at the helm?], and victory was won!"

On another occasion, when Washington was preparing for his attack at Yorktown, which turned the tide of the war to America's side, he approached Robert Morris and Judge Peters. "What can you do for me?" said Washington to Mr. Peters. 'With money, everything, without it, nothing,' he replied, at the same time turning an anxious look toward Mr. Morris. 'Let me know the sum you desire' said Mr. Morris; and before noon Washington's plan and estimates were complete. Mr. Morris promised him the amount, and raised it upon his own responsibility."

Time after time Robert Morris gave his own resources and raised money on his own credit to keep Washington and his men going. One record remarked: "If it were not [proven] by official records, posterity would hardly be made to believe that the campaign . . . which . . . closed the Revolutionary War, was sustained wholly on the credit of an individual merchant."

When the War ended, this self-made millionaire spent 3 ½ years in debtors prison after he lost everything. His wife, Mary Morris, who was born to a wealthy family and educated in the classics, watched possession after possession disappear during the War. When Robert went to prison after giving so much to the cause of freedom, she tended a borrowed little farm and walked each day to the prison with her daughter Maria to visit her husband. Robert left prison a broken down old man and died shortly thereafter. The financier of the Revolution, and his family, understood public virtue—voluntarily sacrificing personal benefit for the good of society.

Thomas and Lucy Nelson

So did Thomas Nelson, Jr. a signer of the Declaration of Independence from Virginia. He was Liber educated in the classics under the tutelage of his father and was later individually mentored by the celebrated Dr. Proteus at Cambridge. When the Revolutionary War started, he was called as the head of the military of the state of Virginia. "The sudden call of the militia from their homes left many families [destitute], for a great part of the agricultural operations were suspended."

General Nelson used his own money and resources to support many of his poorest soldiers, "and thus more than a hundred families were kept from absolute want." [ii]

The biographer of the Signers, B.J. Lossing, wrote: “Mr. Nelson made many and great [financial] sacrifices for his country. When, in 1780, the French fleet was hourly expected, Congress felt it highly necessary that provision should be made for them. But its credit was prostrate, and its calls upon the States were [ignored]. Virginia proposed to raise two million . . . dollars, and Mr. Nelson at once” set out to raise the money. “But many wealthy men told Mr. Nelson that they would not contribute a penny on the security of [Congress], but they would lend him all he wanted. He at once added his personal security.”

I have wondered which type of person I would be in similar circumstances—the men who made sure their bank accounts grew during the War, or the Thomas Nelson and Robert Morris type who gave their all. At one point in the War, Washington was losing and his men starving while the British were well supplied from American merchants. I have wondered whether in the same circumstances I would keep selling to the British, or do like so many American Farmers and Merchants did and burn down my own business, crop or livelihood. Can you imagine voluntarily pouring the kerosene on your shop, and hand in hand with your spouse lighting the match and walking away to bankruptcy – all because your side was so close to losing the war?

Thomas Nelson was elected Governor of Virginia when Thomas Jefferson’s term expired, and during the Battle of Yorktown, the one which Robert Morris funded and which turned the tide of the War to the Americans, Governor Nelson noticed that the American troops were firing at every home in town except his own personal home. The British had stationed a number of their officers in his home, perhaps believing that as the home of the governor and head of the state military it was safe. Governor Nelson positioned himself at the head of his troops and begged them to open fire on his home – and it was shelled by canon fire.

Within a month of this battle, his health broke and he shortly passed away. Thomas Nelson’s biographer wrote that “he descended into the grave honored and beloved, and alas! of his once vast estates, that honor and love was almost all that he left behind him. He had spent a princely fortune in his Country’s service; his horses had been taken from the plough and sent to drag the munitions of war; his granaries had been thrown open to a starving soldiery and his ample purse had been drained to its last dollar, when the credit of Virginia could not bring a sixpence into her treasury. Yet it was the widow of this man who . . . had yet to learn whether republics can be grateful.”

Lucy Nelson had been born wealthy and had helped Thomas make his fortune and rise to the Governor’s mansion. When he died early, broke and destitute, she was left to raise eleven children and eke out a living for three decades alone. When she died at eighty years of age she was “blind, infirm” and still poor, and she willed her only earthly possession, \$20, to her minister. The Nelson family understood both Liber and Public Virtue.

Samuel and Eliza Adams

Another man, whose name is more familiar, also personified these forgotten virtues. Samuel Adams was educated by his father in the liberal arts through the classics.[iii] He attempted to go into business several times but he spent so much time studying the classics and reading about government and politics that he nearly went bankrupt in every business endeavor. He finally got a job as a tax collector through one of his political contacts. However, he had a hard time with this job also. As a biographer tells it: "Times were hard, money was scarce, and the collections fell [way behind]. Adams's enemies raised the cry of [mismanagement].

"Then it came out that Sam Adams had refused to sell out the last cow or pig or the last sack of potatoes or corn meal or the scant furniture of a poor man to secure his taxes. He had told his superiors in authority that the town did not need the taxes as badly as most of these poor people needed their belongings and that he would rather lose his office than force such collections." This job fell through like his other financial endeavors.

Another biographer wrote: "For years now, Samuel Adams had laid aside all pretense of private business and was devoted simply and solely to public affairs .. His wife, like himself, was contented with poverty; through good management, in spite of their narrow means, a comfortable home life was maintained in which the children grew up happy and in every way well trained and cared for."

Sam Adams and his wife, Elizabeth Wells Adams (she went by the name Eliza), and all of their children sacrificed and suffered for the cause of freedom, including a son who was imprisoned. Even the family dog, a big Newfoundland named Queue, got involved in the War. In fact, Queue was "cut and shot in several places" by British soldiers, because every time a red uniform passed by the Adams farm Queue viciously attacked. Perhaps this dog understood the issues or at least the views of his master. As Eliza Adams's biographer wrote: "[Queue] had a vast antipathy for the British uniform . . . and bore to his grave honorable scars from his fierce encounters."

In 1763 Sam Adams gave the first public speech in the Americas against the British and the first call for Independence. He was so successful in stirring up support for the Revolution, that when the British later offered clemency to all the signers of the Declaration who would recant, Samuel Adams and John Hancock were purposely left of the list. He was an instigator of the Boston Tea Party and was involved in almost every major event of the Revolution. He served in the Continental Congress and the records show that he was involved in almost every significant committee and spoke on nearly every important issue.

Once, in response to a suggestion to try to compromise with the British, Samuel Adams obtained the floor and said to the General Council of the States: "I should advise persisting in our struggle for liberty, though it were revealed from Heaven that nine hundred and ninety-nine were to perish and only one of a thousand were

to survive and retain his liberty! One such freeman must possess more virtue, and enjoy more happiness than a thousand slaves . . .”

In a time when many people spoke against slavery but owned slaves, Samuel and Eliza Adams urged everyone to free any and all slaves, and then set the example by promptly freeing all slaves the moment they came into possession of them.

In 1774, when Samuel Adams was elected to Congress, he had no money for the necessary expenses, and his absence would likely have left his family destitute. A private letter, written on August 11, 1774, tells the story: some of his neighbors, their names kept anonymous, “asked his permission to build him a new barn . . . which was executed in a few days.”

A second benefactor repaired his house; a third invited him to a tailor’s shop and then had him measured for and purchased him a new suit of cloths which was later delivered to his home. A fourth presented him with a new wig and a fifth bought him a new hat. Three others purchased him six articles of clothing, including a new pair of shoes. Another community member slipped him a purse of money; when he searched it, it contained adequate gold to cover his expenses.

His kinsman John Adams wrote: “. . . Samuel Adams . . . never planned, laid a scheme or formed a design of laying up anything for himself . . . The case of Samuel Adams is almost without a parallel as an instance of enthusiastic, unwavering devotion to public service throughout a long life.”

Francis and Elizabeth Lewis

Another family that epitomized Liber and Public Virtue was the Francis and Elizabeth Lewis family.[iv] Francis was a signer of the Declaration from New York, was educated in the classics and built a successful business from scratch with the help of Elizabeth. They both gave their wealth and health for our freedom.

“Like Floyd, Livingstone, and Robert Morris, the other New York signers, Francis Lewis was [outlawed] by the British and a price set on his head. The enemy did not stop there. Very soon after they were in possession of Long Island, Captain Birtch was sent with a troop . . . ‘to seize the lady and destroy the property.’ As the soldiers advanced on one side, a ship of war from the other fired upon the house . . . Mrs. Lewis looked calmly on. A shot from the vessel struck the board on which she stood. One of her servants cried: ‘Run, Mistress, run.’ She replied: ‘Another shot is not likely to strike the same spot,’ and did not change her place. The soldiers entered the house and . . . destroyed books, papers, and pictures, ruthlessly broke up the furniture, and then, after pillaging the house, departed taking Mrs. Lewis with them.”

“She was carried to New York and thrown into prison. She was not allowed a bed or change of clothing and only the coarse and scanty food that was doled out to the other prisoners.” She soon died from the treatment and illnesses she sustained in

prison. Francis lived without her for twenty-four more years; he never remarried, but lived to know the lonely price of public virtue.

The Teachers of Liberty

Consider the contribution of four great teachers of the Founding generation, three of whom were signers of the Declaration: George Wythe, John Witherspoon, Benjamin Rush and a man who is remembered simply as Mr. Lovell. Among them they mentored almost an entire generation of leaders in Liber and Public Virtue. Their students include John Adams, Jefferson, Madison, Monroe, Henry Clay, John Marshall, Hancock, Paine, four future U.S. Presidents, many future Supreme Court Justices, over sixty future governors, senators, representatives and judges, and as Professor Forrest McDonald put it, “enough other Founding Fathers to populate a small standing army.”

Biographer Robert Peterson said that George Wythe’s school alone “produced a generation of lawyers, judges, ministers, teachers and statesmen who helped fill the need for leadership in the young nation.” This was, in fact, George Wythe’s explicit agenda. The curriculum and message of these teachers, both on paper and through example, was Liber, private virtue and public virtue.

Roger and Rebecca Sherman

Or consider Roger and Rebecca Sherman.[v] Roger Sherman, was apprenticed as a shoemaker and gained a Liber education reading the classics he placed on his bench in front of him while he worked on shoes. He started with mathematics classics and became a leading mathematician; for example, he did the astronomical calculations for an almanac that was published in New York when he was twenty-seven. He went from mathematics to a study of the law, and became a leading jurist in Rhode Island and later the only man to participate in the creation of and sign all four of the founding documents of the United States—all springing from the books on his cobbler bench.

His wife Rebecca was similarly self-educated in the classics, and when she married Roger she was twenty years old and took over the raising of Roger’s seven children from his first wife Elizabeth. She educated the seven children, plus the eight additional children she and Roger had, and she taught them Liber, private virtue and public virtue.

Other Examples

So many other stories could be told: Like Honest John Hart, who was “hounded and hunted as a criminal” while his wife lay dying.[vi] Or, Richard Stockton, who was thrown in prison, his lands were destroyed, and he ended up literally begging for food and money to keep his family alive.[vii]

Or, Martha Jefferson, who fled with her two-month old baby in her arms to escape the invading British. The baby died soon after, and within two years she herself passed on from illnesses incurred during the conflict.[viii]

Abraham and Sarah Clark

But consider the Public Virtue of one more family, who more than self their country loved: Abraham and Sarah Clark.[ix] Self-educated in the classics, Abraham became known as “the poor man’s lawyer” because of his habit of service without pay. A poor farmer, his reading and study made him prominent and he was elected to Congress and signed the Declaration of Independence with the New Jersey delegation.

The British gave this simple man and his wife perhaps the cruelest punishment of all. They captured two of his sons who were serving under Washington, 25-year-old Thomas and young teenage Isaac, and threw them into the prison ship in the harbor. Then they informed Abraham Clark that his sons would not be given food until he publicly recanted his signature on the Declaration of Independence.

He gladly offered his life, his freedom and all his possessions, but they weren’t accepted. The British demanded that he recant or his sons would slowly starve. Abraham and Sarah determined that they could give up their life. They could give up their fortune. But they simply could not give away their sacred honor, even to save the lives of their dear sons. They never signed the recantation. Imagine, on a 4th of July in 1780, Abraham and Sarah Clark sitting at home meditating on the price of Public Virtue.

What of the Future?

On the 4th of July in 1776 John Hancock, man of Liber and public virtue, signed the Declaration of Independence and sent it to the world with his name alone.

On the 4th of July in 1826, as if by divine mandate, both John Adams and Thomas Jefferson passed away—on the same special day, only a few hours apart.

On the 4th of July in 1862 a bloody Civil War tested whether this union would survive.

On the 4th of July in 1943 Americans gave their lives in Europe and around the Pacific to keep the flag of freedom waving.

In this 4th of July in the year 2000, consider this question: How many Liber are there today in the United States?

And secondly, how many acts of public virtue fill the courthouses, congressional chambers or governors mansions across this land?

The answer tells us what the future of our freedoms will be. But more importantly, how many homes are training young men and women to be Liber, to spend their lives in public virtue? I know that we are busy going to school, making a living, enjoying the leisure our freedom gives us. But if we are too busy to read the classics

and become Liber, to sacrifice our time and resources to protect our freedoms and build our communities, to stand for something, then we are too busy to remain free. Too busy to secure the blessings of liberty to ourselves and our posterity.

Think ahead to the 4th of July in the year 2032.

What will America be like then?

The answer depends on three things: how many Liber there are, how many people dedicate their lives to private virtue, and how much public virtue we choose between now and then. The future of America depends on whether we are willing to stand for something. To become Liber, men and women of public virtue. I believe that we will still be free on the 4th of July, 2032. If we are, it will be because someone, somewhere, pays the price.

Some of you have tonight felt the call to become men and women of Liber and public virtue. Do not ignore that call.

[i]The idea of using the signers of the Declaration of Independence as examples of public virtue came from a speech I read by Rush Limbaugh's father, and I appreciate his speech and the fact that his son has published and distributed it. None of the stories in this speech are taken directly from that speech; most of the stories hereafter, including all of the stories and quotes about Robert and Mary Morris come from two excellent books: B.J. Lossing. 1848. Lives of the Signers of the Declaration of Independence (hereafter Signers). Reprinted in 1998 by Wallbuilders in Aledo, Texas, 93-98; and Wives of the Signers, The Women Behind the Declaration of Independence (hereafter Wives), also published by Wallbuilders, 155-168. I have not done independent research to verify the stories in these books. I highly recommend both of these books to students who choose to study further. [ii] Stories and quotes about Thomas and Lucy Nelson come from in Signers, 188-193 and Wives, 250-254. [iii] Stories and quotes about Samuel and Eliza Adams come from Signers, 33-36 and Wives, 62-80. [iv] Stories and quotes about Francis and Elizabeth Lewis come from Signers, 71-73 and Wives, 119-126. [v] Stories and quotes about Roger and Rebecca Sherman come from Signers, 50-52 and Wives, 92-98. [vi] See Wives, 144-147. [vii] See Wives, 132-139. [viii] See Wives, 240-247. [ix] Stories and quotes about Abraham and Sarah Clark come from Signers, 90-92 and Wives, 147-149.