

## America - The Last Best Hope of Earth

By Jack Painter

*The following is a speech given by Jack Painter to a group of High Schools students at a Freedoms Foundation Conference in Cincinnati, Ohio on November 4, 2010.*

How many of you remember reading about the Boston Tea Party in your High School history books?

It was a protest against oppressive government and led to the founding of our nation.

I am involved in a political movement that burst on the scene a year and a half ago and has its roots in that Boston protest.

We call ourselves the Tea Party movement, but even though we have the word "Party" in our name, we are not a political party, and our members include Republicans, Democrats, Libertarians, and Independents.

We are really just a group of concerned citizens who don't want our country to abandon its founding principles.

By founding principles, I mean the idea that all men are created equal and are endowed by their creator with certain inalienable rights, including the right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness, and the idea that the purpose of government is to secure those rights.

I'll talk a bit in a minute about those ideas, but first, how did a corporate lawyer like me, who has no personal political ambitions, get involved in the Tea Party movement?

There were several events that inspired me, but one of the key ones took place in August 2009 when I attended a speech by the historian David McCullough.

McCullough talked about our founding fathers and George Washington in particular.

At the end of his speech he told a story about Washington that inspired me.

As you may recall, the battle of Trenton occurred Christmas night, December 26, 1776. Washington and his troops crossed the Delaware by boat in the dead of winter and defeated the British at Trenton, New Jersey. This proved to be a turning point in the Revolutionary War.

A few days later, on December 31, Washington called a large part of his troops out into formation to speak to them.

The way the system worked, all enlistments for the entire army were up on January 1, 1777. Every soldier was free to go home.

Keep in mind that these were volunteers from every walk of life ó farmers, shop keepers, blacksmiths.

Washington appeared before his men on horse and urged them to reenlist. He said that if they would sign up for six more months, he'd give them a bonus of \$10, which was almost a month's pay at the time.

As McCullough put it, "These were men who were desperate for pay of any kind. Their families were starving."

The drums rolled, and Washington asked people who were willing to stay on to step forward.

No one stepped forward.

Washington turned on his horse and started to ride away. Suddenly, he stopped, turned around and returned.

He then said the following three sentences to his men. We know this because someone wrote down his exact words.

"My brave fellows, you have done all I asked you to do, and more than could be reasonably expected, but your country is at stake, your wives, your houses, and all that you hold dear. You have worn yourselves out with fatigues and hardships, but we know not how to spare you. If you will consent to stay one month longer, you will render that service to the cause of liberty, and to your country, which you can probably never do under any other circumstance."

According to David McCullough, it was as if Washington was saying:

"You are fortunate. You have a chance to serve your country in a way that nobody else is going to be able to, and everybody else is going to be jealous of you, and you will count this the most important decision and most valuable service of your lives."

After Washington spoke, the drums rolled again, and men began stepping forward.

This story stuck with me, and it affected my willingness to step forward and get involved in defending our nation's founding principles.

So what's the key founding principle that we're trying to defend?

Abraham Lincoln was referring to that principle when he called America "the last best hope of earth".

Has anyone ever said that about any other country? For example, have you ever heard anyone say that about Germany? Brazil? Japan? What makes our country so unique, so exceptional, that it deserves such high praise?

The answer is that our government was founded on the idea that "all men are created equal".

- In other words, we are all equally human and therefore equally free.
- Each of us has the right to be left alone in our pursuit of happiness as long as we honor the equal right of others to be left alone.

At the time of our founding, this was one of the most radical ideas in history, and no one had ever formed a government dedicated to that proposition.

This idea was the basis for movements that abolished slavery, established women's rights, and fought racial discrimination.

It is also the basis for the American Dream.

- The idea that regardless of what color or nationality you are, what family you come from, or what community you grew up in, you have the freedom to pursue your dreams, enjoy the fruits of your labor, and provide better opportunities for your children.
- People have come here from all over the world to experience that freedom.

So what does this idea of equal freedom mean in practice? Here are some examples:

- First, it means people should be treated equally under the law, and judges shouldn't give special treatment to people out of compassion or treat people differently because they like them or don't like them.

Let's say you get arrested for drunk driving, and the judge sentences you to jail. Is it fair for the same judge to give Lindsay Lohan a fine with no jail time just because she's a celebrity?

- Equal freedom also means people should be free to buy and sell goods and services at whatever price they agree without having the government step in to help one person at the expense of another.

For example, let's say you own an iPad worth \$500 that you plan to sell on EBay, and the government passes a law that says if a person sells an iPad to someone under age 14 the seller can't charge more than \$250. Is that fair to you? Is it fair to older kids who have to pay full price?

- Equal freedom also means we should be cautious about letting the government redistribute people's wealth ó that's when the government takes some of what you earn and gives it to people they think need it more than you.

It's sort of like getting a job after school and having your parents force you to give some of your paycheck to your brothers and sisters. After a certain point, you are in effect a servant to the people who receive your money, which means you are not their equal.

- Finally, we should all have the same free speech rights - just because you don't like someone's political views doesn't mean you should be able to prevent them from expressing those views.

You might say that can't happen here, but just last year the federal government tried to claim the power to ban YouTube videos and even books if they are published by a corporation and urge people to vote for or against a political candidate. That's the type of thing that happens in China, where the government limits access to YouTube and Google.

People who want to restrict corporate speech argue that corporations have too much power and shouldn't have free speech rights. But there are two problems with their argument. First, our major media companies are corporations. If we say corporations don't have free speech rights, what will prevent the government from eventually censoring editorials by the New York Times and other media outlets? Second, if the government can prohibit certain people from publishing their political views, you won't have the freedom to choose what political speech you read and hear ó the government will make that decision for you.

The problem today is that some people are willing to abandon the idea of equal freedom in an effort to achieve goals they think are more important. In most cases, their goal is to eliminate inequalities in income, wealth, and political influence. In other words, they are willing to sacrifice equal freedom to achieve equal results.

But abandoning equal freedom, even for good reasons, is dangerous. Once we've abandoned the idea that all men are created equal and are equally free, we are at the mercy of our fellow citizens. There's really no principle that protects us from government actions that arbitrarily favor some over others.

And once it starts, it's hard to stop. Take government redistribution of wealth. When you rob Peter to pay Paul, you can always count on the support of Paul. And as we've seen in Europe recently, people get very upset if you threaten their claim on others.

So what's the key to upholding the idea of equal freedom?

Our founding fathers believed that to safeguard liberty we needed a Constitution that establishes boundaries on the power of government.

- Without boundaries, government tends to grow more powerful over time.
- As it does, it eventually becomes a threat to liberty.
- As someone said, "A government big enough to give you everything you want is strong enough to take everything you have."

So we have to be vigilant to make sure our government follows our Constitution.

- To do that, we need to push back when our freedom is threatened and insist that government treat all people equally.
- We also need to make sure our federal government doesn't exceed its powers and try to run our lives for us. For example, the government now is telling us what type of health insurance we can buy. How would you like it if the government told you what type of jeans you can buy? What gives them the right to make that decision for you?
- Finally, we have to stay educated and try to pass along our founding principles to future generations.

If we do these things, we can preserve the idea of equal freedom. And it's clear from history that with equal freedom, there is no limit to what we can achieve.

So as we leave here today, let's keep in mind what makes us great – the idea that all men and women are created equal and are equally free.

Let's stand up for that idea and commit to preserve it. If we do that, we can preserve the American Dream for every citizen.

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