

In Praise of Private Life

by George Friedman - January 21, 2021

Joe Biden has been inaugurated as president of the United States, and Donald Trump has taken the traditional flight home. Many are incensed by the fact that Biden stole the presidency, and many are incensed by the fact that Trump tried to stage a coup to retain his office. There are endless details and nuances that have left them not only angry but self-righteous about it, convinced that they know hidden truths that lurk behind the outrage.

It is impossible to measure such things, but I think that the dominant mood of the nation is exhaustion and boredom. Many were indifferent all along, and many stopped caring the 15th time they heard the same accusations shouted at the top of someone's lungs. It is important to remember that there were millions of Americans who did not vote, and millions who voted without believing that it mattered all that much who won. Who would become president was simply not an important dimension of their lives, and regardless of all the urgency that was pressed on them, they occupied themselves with other affairs.

Among the indifferent to presidential politics are those who may be considered unsophisticated, unable to grasp the profundity of the choice, and insufficiently educated perhaps to understand how much it matters. I would argue differently: These are the people who understand that they live their lives in private, and that the things that matter are their love for their children, their work and their duty to love their God. Private life is a rich tapestry that can so absorb someone that they hardly notice the affairs of the day, or, more precisely, they see the important affairs of the day as happening in their own lives and not in the vast and distant halls of government, where even the best intended frequently make bad things worse. There is nothing they can do to prevent this, and they know that it is nonsensical to think they can reshape the government's actions. So they live their lives and savor its pleasures, seeing the rulers as a problem to be suffered.

The United States was founded on a strange principle: to protect private life. Liberty meant not only that I may do as I please (within reasonable boundaries) but that the future of the nation rested in the hands of the vast, turbulent and creative private life rather than the state. Governments may make policies, but they mean nothing except for what private citizens make of them. The government is worth an election day to them, or a donation, or even a rage attack. But whatever Thomas Jefferson may have dreamt about the West, it is the families who crossed the Appalachians

to new lands that made that dream come true. Had Jefferson never had that dream, the armies of the private would have made it so anyway.

Modern politicians have more power than the founders wanted them to have, but in general they promise more than they can do. Government is complex and hard to manage. What a leader wants and what the government gives him are very different, but politicians are skilled at convincing others that they know what needs to be done. Few really use the power they are endowed with. We like to blame politicians for what happens to us, but they are almost as surprised as we are.

We have the right to elect our representatives, but this isn't our greatest right. The greatest right is to be left alone and to live our lives as we choose. For most Americans, the exercise of that right creates a sphere of nobility, where charity and justice are carried out. This is the heart of the United States, the one that the founders cherished above all else. And the greatest right we have is the right not to care about the things we choose not to care about. In the morning, we wake in a bed with someone we love, and in a neighborhood where real life is lived, and where the politicians come and worship, and where the latest government scheme is systematically undermined.

The United States is not filled with rage. It is filled with the lives of private men and women who understand that the obsessions of the political exist beneath the reality of being human. There are many dimensions of political life – love, contempt, war – all of which are real but none of which have the power of the love that is possible in private. The political changes us, of course, but far less than we think.

The founders did everything they could to ensure the liberty of private life. And for all the later intrusions, they succeeded. The great things occur in private, in the place where the founders meant for us to live. The idea that a president or a congress has the wit or understanding to change that has proved difficult. So for those who want to be enraged, by all means please be so. The founders protected us from excessive rage, by worship at the altar of private life where rage is far more intimate and authentic than the posturing of public life.

And with that I move on to the eternal strangeness of geopolitics, a public event best savored in private.

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