

DISPUTATION CLI

September 8, 2016

Dearest Peucinians,

To returning members of the society and new members alike, I eagerly await your presence in Massachusetts Hall for earnest discussion and your uncensored thoughts. I welcome you all to join us tomorrow to discuss a matter as relevant to us today as it was 240 years ago...

RESOLVED: REVERENCE FOR THE LAW OUGHT BE OUR POLITICAL RELIGION

Affirmative: William Jennings Bryan '19

Negative: Andrew Carnegie '17

Who is the true arbiter of our rights, and who shall judge whether or not they've been violated? What is a citizen permitted to do in defense of his vital interests when all his usual means of redress have been exhausted?

Resistance to political authority has been central to our political life before we even began calling ourselves Americans. From revolutionary uprisings to acts of non-violent civil disobedience, our history is rich with examples of individuals disregarding the law of the land for political ends. The most celebrated figure in American history set us on the path to forging our own destiny by serving as General and Commander-in-Chief of the Continental Army, expelling a tyrannical sovereign and his forces from our nation and clearing the path for better laws and a free government.

And yet we are hesitant to say that anyone is above the law. The second most celebrated figure in American history, just twenty years before he would deliver our nation through a great civil war, declared "Whenever the vicious portion of our population shall be permitted to gather in bands of hundreds and thousands, and burn churches, ravage and rob provision stores, throw printing-presses into rivers, shoot editors, and hang and burn obnoxious persons at pleasure and with impunity, depend upon it, this government cannot last." That great expositor of American revolutionary thought, Thomas Jefferson, himself admits "Prudence, indeed, will dictate that Governments long established should not be changed for light and transient causes." Will we always have Lincolns and Jeffersons in our midst to judge whether a cause is light or whether it is substantial?

The writings of Edmund Burke remind us what is at stake when we take the existing laws for granted. On the eve of the French Revolution, Frenchmen lived under laws that guaranteed their rights to life and property and one of the mildest monarchs in their recent history, Louis XVI. After the storming of the Bastille, the National Assembly took it upon itself to freely seize property while the revolutionaries participated in unprecedented acts of cruelty, "authorizing treasons, robberies, rapes, assassinations, slaughters, and burnings throughout their harassed land." Burke wonders, "Is it because liberty in the abstract may be classed amongst the blessings of mankind, that I am seriously to felicitate a madman, who has escaped from the protecting restraint and wholesome darkness of his cell, on his restoration to the enjoyment of light and liberty?"

Should we work within the existing political framework to affect change, or are there moments when one must cease to be a law abiding citizen in order to be a citizen in the truest sense? There is no better time than this, as one of the two major-party candidates for President has anointed himself the "law-and-order candidate," to reflect upon the legitimate sources of authority in society and our status as citizens in relation to the law.

Thursday September 7th, 7:45 PM
3rd Floor of Massachusetts Hall
Semi-Formal Attire

Yours,
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Pinos Loquentes Semper Habemus