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Great Book of the Modern Age

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We the People

Victor Hugo, a French poet and author of the book *Les Misérables*, said that “When dictatorship is a fact, revolution becomes a right.” Victor Hugo’s purpose in writing *Les Misérables* was to expose and critique the social injustice that existed in nineteenth-century European society. Although the idea of a revolution might sound risky or even dangerous, as Jean-Jacques Rousseau stated in *The Social Contract*, “Every man has a right to risk his own life in order to preserve it.” In 1776, a draft of the Declaration of Independence was sent to King George. It was not simply an appeal for freedom from Britain; it was a courageous stand against being controlled by their former King. They took a risk by separating themselves from their homeland and revolting against the King’s political control, but it paid off. They succeeded in forming “a more perfect union” than the one they had left. Later that century, the French people became restless. They were poor, starving, and the noblemen didn’t seem to care about or even acknowledge their dire state. So, a group gathered together and formed the National Assembly, rebels intent on overthrowing their government and creating a better one. It worked for the Americans; why wouldn’t it work for them? However, the outcome speaks for itself. Although an enormous amount of change did occur, usually in the form of higher guillotine usage, frantic wars with neighboring countries, and exiled kings, the French Revolution never really made France better. So, what went wrong? Why was the American Revolution so much more successful than its French doppelgänger? Everyone can typically agree that governments should be flexible enough to recognise their faults and, hopefully, correct them. Some people

think that they should engage in revolution in order to change a stubborn government, whereas others believe that engaging in revolution is chaotic and impractical. Citizens should engage in revolution for three reasons; to protect their rights, to put speech into action, and to improve a corrupt government.

The first reason citizens should revolt is to protect their rights. Why are rights so important? Rousseau believed that “The words slave and right contradict each other, and are mutually exclusive” (Rousseau). When people lose their rights, they lose their freedom, and consequently become no more than slaves. As Edmund Burke asserted, “It is better to cherish virtue and humanity, by leaving much to free will, even with some loss to the object, than to attempt to make men mere machines and instruments of a political benevolence. The world on the whole will gain by a liberty without which virtue cannot exist” (Burke). Upholding the free exercise of one’s rights ensures that one acts out of virtue, not simply obedience to a domineering government. For example, whether or not the COVID vaccine is effective, necessary, or even safe, it should be an individual’s right to decide if it is beneficial for them. As convinced as the government is that this vaccine will ensure our health and safety, they should not use sign-on bonuses, job security, or educational access as leverage to make people get it. As Ronald Reagan put it, “Government exists to protect us from each other. Where the government has gone beyond its limits is in deciding to protect us from ourselves” (Reagan). A corrupt government may offer trite assurances, such as safety, well-being, and peace, but when those things come at the price of one’s liberty, then it may be the most dangerous form of safety, the most unhealthy form of well-being, and the most turbulent form of peace. Being held in the arms of a strong man may feel safe, but that depends on whether he is using that strength to protect, or to harm. Citizens should beware when the government enacting laws for the common good also means losing their rights. “It will be said that the despot assures his subjects civil tranquility... What do they gain, if the very tranquility they enjoy is one of their miseries?

Tranquility is found also in dungeons; but is that enough to make them desirable places to live in?" (Rousseau).

The second reason is to put speech into action. The first Amendment assures that "Congress shall make no law... abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances." Obviously, this only works when the government respects the voice of their people. When it doesn't- when it becomes oppressive and tyrannical, then revolution becomes a necessity for the people who have been silenced by a demeaning government. If their voices will not be heard, then their actions must speak louder. Although the early colonists spoke out about King George's "history of repeated injuries and usurpations," listing 27 grievances against him in the Declaration of Independence, they won their freedom through the Revolutionary War. The problem was not that the colonists were not speaking up, the problem was that the British were not listening. "We have warned them from time to time of attempts by their legislature to extend an unwarrantable jurisdiction over us... They too have been deaf to the voice of justice and of consanguinity. We must acquiesce in the necessity, which denounces our Separation, and hold them, as we hold the rest of mankind, Enemies in War, in Peace Friends" (Jefferson et al). If a government disregards its peoples' voice over important issues, then its people should begin to disregard its leadership and power, and consider their government as an enemy.

The third reason is to improve a corrupt government. Asking the government to fix the government is like asking cancer to cure cancer, and this is doubly true of a corrupt government because their leaders, or rather- rulers, are usually too power hungry to admit to their own faults, much less make any effort to change. Instead, it is the duty of the people to hold their government accountable. "When a long train of abuses... evinces a design to reduce them under absolute Despotism, it is their right, it is their duty, to throw off such government and to provide new Guards for their future security" (Jefferson et al). This doesn't mean that citizens have to go on dramatic crusades every time their government does something they don't agree

with. No nation can afford to repeatedly tear down and rebuild its government over trivial causes. Burke asserted that "It is with infinite caution that any man ought to venture upon pulling down an edifice, which has answered... the common purposes of society, or on building it up again, without having models and patterns of approved utility before his eyes" (Burke). However, they can revolt in small ways. For instance, employees who quit a job because they do not feel comfortable taking a new, untested vaccine shows their government that they will not be controlled, that they are in charge of their own health and safety, and that they would rather risk their career than their liberty. After enough people stand up to vaccine mandates- after the unemployment rate has skyrocketed even more than it already has- maybe then the government will start to respect its people; maybe then the government will begin to understand who is really in control. Jefferson wrote that the sufferings of the early Americans made revolution a necessity. "Such has been the patient sufferance of these Colonies; and such is now the necessity which constrains them to alter their former Systems of Government" (Jefferson et al). If citizens stand by and do nothing, then they cannot expect anything to change. If they allow a corrupt government to endure, then it will.

Some people believe that citizens should not engage in revolution because revolutions incite chaos. Burke felt that the French Revolutionaries were indifferent to the chaos they were creating and only cared about getting attention. "Plots, massacres, assassinations, seem to some people a trivial price for obtaining a revolution. A cheap, bloodless reformation, a guiltless liberty, appear flat and vapid to their taste. There must be a great change of scene; there must be a magnificent stage effect; there must be a grand spectacle to rouse the imagination" (Burke). However, this reason is inadequate because Burke himself admitted that "They who destroy everything certainly will remove some grievance" (Burke). Sometimes, temporary social unrest is necessary in order to attain lasting, positive change. Another reason one might disagree is because revolutions are often led by inexperienced and unorganized rebels. "The science of government [is] so practical in itself, and intended for such practical purposes, a

matter which requires... even more experience than any person can gain in his whole life, however sagacious and observing he may be” (Burke). Even when a government has become corrupt and tyrannical, revolution seems like a homemade remedy to a serious disease, the revolutionaries being too inexperienced to properly provide a better government than even the most despotic ruler can. An unfair and cruel ruler has enough experience in politics to make their citizens feel secure, when they are actually trapped. However, citizens are better off under their own rule than under the rule of unvirtuous leaders. When a government is committing the same crimes that they are supposed to be preventing, such as murder, theft, and fraud, then its citizens are safer without them. Neither the fact that revolutions are chaotic in nature, nor that revolutionary leaders are inexperienced and unorganized, are reasons why people should not engage in revolution to bring about change.

To conclude, citizens should engage in revolution to protect their rights, to put speech into action, and to improve a corrupt government. This subject matters to people who question the effectiveness of voicing their objections against a greater power- namely, their government. Citizens should hold a “We the People” mentality towards their nation’s future success and security, be concerned with and play a critical role in their government, and beware of dictatorship invading their political system. After all, said Benjamin Franklin, “War is when the government tells you who the bad guy is. Revolution is when you decide for yourself.”

Works Cited

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