

Magna Carta: *The Foundation of Freedom* 1215-2015

On June 15, 2015 the English speaking world will celebrate the 800th anniversary of the world's foremost liberty document: Magna Carta. This ancient sheepskin may seem irrelevant to us in the 21st century as we face financial chaos and the usurpation of private property on a scale never before seen in America. Why should we care about what some archbishop wrote 800 years ago?

We should care because Magna Carta was the foundation and inspiration for America's freedom documents. Most Americans have forgotten that Magna Carta was a spiritual charter declaring God and His law as Sovereign over the king and his law.

"The Magna Carta doesn't start with barons, and doesn't start with individual liberties. It doesn't start with political considerations, and it doesn't start with the issue of who holds what power. Magna Carta starts as a religious document, concerned with the "health of the soul" of the King, and with the "honour of God," and with the "exaltation of the Holy Church." In addition to that, the King acknowledges that the "advice" for signing the Carta comes from the bishops first, and then from the barons."¹

Like Americans today, the English of the 13th century had nearly forgotten their great heritage of Christian liberty. Their nation was filled with corruption and lawlessness. A small group of landowners and business leaders at that time

experienced much of the same anger and frustrations that we face each day. They were overwhelmed by a lawless monarch, in their case, a king.

King John had killed the true heir to the throne and began tyrannizing the people. He confiscated more and more of their wealth, imprisoned them without trial, and even violated their wives. In 1214 he demanded such high taxes from everyone that the poor serfs were starving in the streets.



Magna Carta grasped in his left hand, a sword in his right, the American colonist stands prepared to fight in defense of his liberties. The seal of Massachusetts in 1775 is shown here in one of the windows of the State House in Boston.

The nobles and landowners, wrote a letter to the king demanding that he abide by the law. King John refused their request and multiplied his efforts to tyrannize nobles and peasants alike. So the nobles made a wise choice and went to the most committed spiritual leader of the time, Stephen Langton, the Archbishop of Canterbury. They asked him to write a document that would force the king to limit his power based on the law of the land (the biblically-based common law). Langton was well motivated to write this document since he had seen some of his own

family torn from his house and exiled by this wicked monarch.

Langton's writing became known as Magna Carta, the foremost document of liberty ever produced. Magna Carta, and its 63 articles, became the masterpiece of Christian liberty for the next 800 years. Its first article insured that the church shall forever be free from state interference. It stipulated that there could be no taxation without representation.

¹Bojidar Marinov, "The Forgotten Clauses of the Magna Carta", American Vision

It demanded a trial for every freeman by a jury of peers.

“The question here is: If the signing of the Magna Carta was a conflict between the King and the barons, as the history textbooks tell us, then why does it start with a solemn clause to defend the liberties of the church? Why were the barons so concerned with the inviolability of the rights of the church rather than with their own rights? Why did it start with acknowledging the fact that the advice was given by the bishops, and only then by the earls and barons of the Kingdom? Isn't it strange that a document presumably initiated by the barons pays such high homage to the church? Also, if Magna Carta was based on the “traditional liberties” in the Saxon Law, why doesn't it mention those liberties, and why does it refer to God as the source of all liberties?

“The answer is: Magna Carta wasn't drafted by the barons, and the English liberties did not come from a political struggle. The liberties of England came from the Church, based on the ideological foundation of the faith in Jesus Christ, and the application of His Law in the English society. The signing of Magna Carta was the culmination of a centuries-long war between the pagan and the Christian concepts of law and power. At Runnymede [where Magna Carta was signed] the Church won the victory for Christianity, and by this victory England—and consequently America—was blessed with freedom more than any other nation in Europe.”²

Magna Carta's greatest legacy is the concept of a nation of laws rather than men. In its final article it called for armed resistance by the people if their rulers would not obey the law. This same obligation of the people to rise up and throw off tyrants is stated in our Declaration of Independence. All of the articles of Magna Carta were rooted in a long history of biblical principles and the Ten Commandments.

Because of King John's arrogance, the nobles were forced to raise an army which they called the

“Army of God.” They marched on the king's troops and they prevailed. They then forced the king to sign Magna Carta on the field at Runnymede on June 15, 1215. It was said that after signing the charter, John escaped back into his castle at Windsor and threw himself on the ground, beat his fists and ate straw like a mad man.

The next year John recanted his agreement to obey Magna Carta. The barons were forced into another war with the king. But the king was caught in a rising tide while he was trying to escape with all his treasure, and he lost his wealth in the ocean. He died of dysentery three days later. From that time forward all the kings of England were periodically forced to deal with the brilliant biblical principles laid out in Magna Carta by Stephen Langton. America's foundations of liberty are built upon these principles and others, reasoned from the Bible.

The story of Magna Carta reveals the strategy of how to restore liberty to a nation in chaos. The force of arms is not the central means of security and maintaining freedom. The people of England, by holding their leaders accountable to a higher power, God and his just principles, checked tyranny without massive bloodshed. We in the 21st century, still have the finest heritage of liberty in human history. We have our treasured freedom documents which call our nation peacefully back to a nation of laws.

But, like the people of England, we must inspire and educate our children and fellow citizens. John Adams, America's 2nd president, reminded us that, “...it is Religion and Morality alone, which can establish the Principles, upon which Freedom can securely stand....The only foundation of a free Constitution is pure Virtue, and if this cannot be inspired into our People....They may change their Rulers, and the forms of Government, but they will not obtain a lasting Liberty. – They will only exchange Tyrants and Tyrannies.”³

Dr. Marshall Foster

²Bojidar Marinov, "The Forgotten Clauses of the Magna Carta", American Vision

³John Jay Institute, "British Christianity and the American Order", 17