

Boulder Rocks

I always figured that if ever I got to Boulder, Colorado, it would be as a student at the Jack Kerouac School of Disembodied Poetics, whose eponym was the Taft

Republican novelist from Lowell, Massachusetts, at whose gravesite my wife left her bridal bouquet.

Instead, I rolled into Boulder to debate—a most un-Kerouacian act, although for all his shyness, Saint Jack had a knack for the non sequitur to which there is no reply. He once halted the verbigeration of a strange episode of “Firing Line” by barking a line from a tune by Slim & Slam: “Flat foot floogie with a floy floy.”

How do you answer that?

My worthy opponent in Boulder was Gary Gregg of the University of Louisville, able debater and genial post-debate drinking companion. We had a grand old time of it and the college kids didn’t seem overly bored ... hell, we probably ought to take this show on the road as a slightly more highbrow version of the WWF.

Our subject? Whether or not the Constitution ought to have been ratified. Now that’s a debate that has grown cold in 220 years, eh?

Poised as ever on the cutting edge of antiquarian irrelevancy, I took the Anti-Federalist side, arguing for liberty and self-rule within a small and modest republic and against the designing men who scrapped the Articles of Confederation for what Patrick Henry called “the most fatal plan that could possibly be conceived to enslave a free people.”

Yet I was no epicene Oxonian willing to argue it either way. *I mean it man*, as a Ron Paul admirer once spat onto vinyl. The Constitution was our first mistake.

I channeled the bibulous Maryland Anti-Federalist Luther Martin, whose

dubious fortune it was to attract me as a biographer (*Forgotten Founder; Drunken Prophet: The Life of Luther Martin*). Sarcotically, we are equally disheveled, but my man Luther, whose bile rode on a rummy wave, could’ve drunk under the table every fratboy in Boulder. I was sipping water, so my impersonation lacked the necessary alcoholic verisimilitude.

In America, the losers in history’s debates either grow devil’s horns or disappear into the gray cloud of consensus, while the winners acquire absurd haloes. Never was this more the case than in the struggle over the Constitution.

The primary architects and defenders of the document were grandiose universalists who believed, as Gouverneur Morris told the Constitutional Convention, that they “came here as ... representative[s] of the whole human race.” The placeless land speculator James Wilson explained that the consolidators had “to form our calculations on a scale commensurate to a large portion of the globe.” These men saw a forest but no trees.

This disorder extends to the *Federalist Papers*, wherein local attachments and local knowledge are belittled throughout. That whinging hypochondriac James Madison argues in *Federalist* 10 for a “large over a small republic” because the former will have “representatives whose enlightened views and sentiments render them superior to local prejudices and to schemes of injustice.” The staggering inaccuracy of this observation has not in the least detracted from the éclat accorded this essay by students of American government.

Yet the Anti-Federalists, prophetic on matters ranging from the imperial presidency to emasculation of the states, misread the future. “[C]an it be supposed,” asked Luther Martin, that people who had so recently fought a revolution for independence “would ever submit to have a national government established, the seat of which would be more than a thousand miles removed from some of them?”

Well, they did. And after the steady nationalization not only of political power but of culture and financial decision-making, today we the people submit to any depredation from distant authorities. Our rulers in Washington send kids from Boulder across James Wilson’s globe to die for nothing, their blood seeding faraway sands—and Colorado meekly submits. The Anti-Federalists thought we’d fight back. Maybe they thought too much of us.

I am sorry to say, Dr. Franklin, that we did not keep the Republic. We blew it. Luther Martin warned us that this was going to happen. The conservative shibboleth when objecting to egregious acts in Washington has long been “It’s unconstitutional!” The Anti-Federalists would have told you that such “unconstitutional” interventions were inevitable.

If we cannot undo 1787 at least we can cut the Constitutionolatry and acknowledge as ancestors the Anti-Federalists, those forgotten localist patriots who stood for small things, for liberty, for their homes, against the assault of centralization.

“Happiness is preferable to the Splendors of a national Government,” said Luther Martin, in vain, to a Constitutional Convention whose delegates, forgetting modesty, aimed at glory and grandeur.

He might as well have told Madison, “Flat foot floogie with a floy floy.” ■

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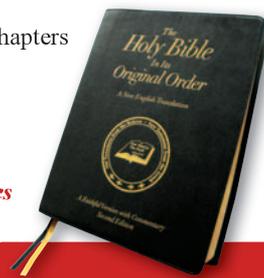
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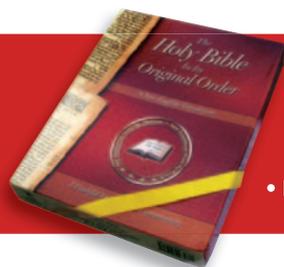
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