

HOMELESS IN PARADISE

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GOD SHED HIS GRACE ON WHOM?

An imaginary patriotic conversation with Benjamin Franklin

By Wanda Sue Parrott

PLANNING my march with the Tap Bananas in Monterey's 4th of July parade caused me to ponder how the Founding Fathers might view their experimental democratic republic's 240th anniversary. "If possible, summarize your impression in one sentence," I imagined myself saying to Benjamin Franklin.

He replied, "My prognostication was right."

"What prediction?"

"Government of the People, by the People and for the People would last 200 years before greed turned it into a Money Monarchy."

"You mean from 1776 to 1976. . ."

"No. Include the Continental Congress years before the federal government went into effect in 1789... a 13-year transition into and a 13-year transition out of it."

"Democracy ended in 1989?"

"No, but it changed form. You were distracted by computer games, the dot.com boom and electronic revolution that produced today's widespread unemployment through outsourcing and loss of jobs."

"What did you tell the Founding Fathers?"

"When I addressed the Constitutional Convention in 1787, I moved to oppose paying salaries for the privilege of serving in the Executive Branch because violent effects would result."

“Name one such violent effect?”

“We called it disenfranchisement. You call it homelessness.”

Homelessness Throughout American History

As I high-stepped along Alvarado Street and watched parade goers waving flags, distant musicians struck up “America the Beautiful.” I sang along:

*O beautiful for spacious skies/
For amber waves of grain/
For purple mountains’ majesty/
Above the fruited plain!/
America! America! God shed His grace on thee,
And crown thy good with brotherhood/
From sea to shining sea. . .*

Ben Franklin asked, “God shed his grace on who?”

“Supposedly on everyone,” I responded. “The poem by Katherine Lee Bates was set to music in 1913.”

“That was long after my death in 1790. The disenfranchised then were Negroes far from their native Africa. They were mostly homeless in America although they lived impoverished in shacks on plantations. God’s light did not shine on most of them, although I knew some fine northern Negroes who were independent, happy businesspeople, and members of my community in Philadelphia.”

I said, “The century between your death in 1790 and 1890 was amazing. The industrial revolution created jobs that took free people from farms to cities, and a job force was formed in which many workers became slaves to sweat shops. The War between the States from 1861-1865 nearly destroyed the idealistic union your Founding Fathers formed.”

“What does history now call that bloody greed-driven conflict?”

“The Civil War. Southern Blacks received freedom from slave-hood when President Lincoln’s Emancipation Proclamation was enacted in 1863. Then, in 1866 the 13th amendment guaranteed permanent freedom from slavery throughout the nation.”

“Did freedom guarantee the Negroes homes?”

“They could choose staying with former masters and working for small wages or striking out on their own. The government promised ten acres and a mule, but never followed through.”

Ben said, “So, they were doubly homeless in America. How are they faring today?”

“We now have our first Black president.”

“And the Indians? Did God shed his grace on them?”

“American poet Henry Wadsworth Longfellow metaphorically foretold their demise. In his so-called romantic epic poem of 1855, “The Song of Hiawatha,” Longfellow’s hero (symbol of all Indians) defeats the physical enemy who is protected by his white wampum coat (money and most-powerful weapons) by shooting an arrow into his brain (defeating his lower consciousness), then sharing the gifts (wisdom) with all his people waiting on the banks.”

“Interesting interpretation. . .”

“Longfellow knew the nations would be obliterated, but souls were saved by ascending into Great Spirit. Does that metaphor for heaven mean God shed his light on Indians?”

Ben Franklin said, “HMMMM. . .”

I said, “A century after your death, in 1890, the federal government consigned the last free Native Americans to homelessness on reservations.”

The parade ended outside Colton Hall.

I asked, “It’s an election year. Any comment?”

Benjamin Franklin repeated his statement as eloquently as he addressed the Constitutional Convention in Philadelphia’s Independence Hall 229 years ago:

“Sir, there are two passions which have a powerful influence in the affairs of men. These are ambition and avarice—the love of power and the love of money. Separately, each of these has great force in prompting men to action; but, when united in view of the same object, they have, in many minds, the most violent effects. . .”

I said, “So, what’s your advice?”

“Vote for candidates committed to ending homelessness.”

Save that for November. Independence Day is Monday. Happy 4th of July to all.

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