

A Common Thread

By Carol Masters

But until the occupation of Wall Street, we had not yet been able to define ourselves as belonging to a collective group with shared interests; shared interests that cross religious, ethnic, and political lines.

The proverbial cat was out of the bag, and the power elites watched on in disbelief and fear as the 99% began to come of age. The language of class struggle had returned and people of all backgrounds and perspectives began to see themselves as joined together in a struggle against the oppression, murder, and thievery that had been going on right under their noses. —Nation of Change www.nationofchange.org.

When a WAMM friend said that providing for the Common Good was part of our Constitution, I blinked. “Surely not,” I demurred. We’d been discussing why on earth corporate-led capitalism, backed by military might, was the basis of U.S. domestic and foreign policy; maybe the Common Good should be a guide.

It seemed to me that in most religions and social theories, foundational principles call for taking care of one another – but was this principle part of the U.S. Constitution? The document that protects individuals and minorities from the oppression of the majority?

She started quoting, so I had to look it up.

“Common Good in the Constitution” led me to all sorts of references, including a number of right-wing blogs that list common good among liberal buzzwords. Fascinating comments were attached, such as “When a politician says ‘for the common good’ I hide my billfold and keep my back against a wall,” and “Isn’t ‘the common good’ a communist slogan?” I hadn’t realized the phrase was so controversial.

In legal decisions about the Constitution, courts have relied on the Preamble for evidence about its intent, as the Founders understood it. Of course, such understandings need to be balanced with the changed circumstances of modern society, but the Preamble does form a guide to interpreting the principal document of our democracy:

We the People of the United States, in Order to form a more perfect Union, establish Justice, insure domestic Tranquility, provide for the common defense, promote the general Welfare, and secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity, do ordain and establish this Constitution for the United States of America.

Hmm. Providing for the Common Good didn't seem to get in there; providing for the Common Defense did. The rest of the goals, however, do indicate an interest in taking care of one another, especially the objective "promote the general welfare." Together with justice and peace (tranquility could be construed as domestic peace), and liberty's blessings, the aims and duties of governance do seem to provide for a common good. Even the common defense is, arguably, a "good" in preventing attacks from other nations.



Painting, by Jean Leon Gerome Ferris, of Betsy Ross who had an upholstery and flag making business. ushistory.org, which examines historical accuracies, found that it's possible she did sew the first American flag.

The framers of the Constitution must have understood the common good as central to human polity; the phrase certainly was current in American revolutionary thought. In his inaugural address, Thomas Jefferson declared: "according to the rules of the Constitution, all will, of course, arrange themselves under the will of the law, and unite in common efforts for the common good." Another signer, James Madison, deplored the tendencies of political opponents to divide themselves into parties that "inflamed them with mutual animosity, and rendered them much more disposed to vex and oppress each other than to co-operate for their common good" (Federalist Papers, 1787, Federalist No. 10). "To pour forth benefits for the common good is divine," said Benjamin Franklin, less well known as the founder of U.S. library systems, who gave his first library that inscription.

The Common Good was not coined in the 18th century, although utilitarian principles associated with "the greatest good for the greatest number" may have

reached an apogee with the philosophers Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill. The notion originated, say ethicists at the Markkula Center for Applied Ethics, the Jesuits' Santa Clara University in Southern California: "over two thousand years ago in the writings of Plato, Aristotle, and Cicero."* Aspects of the idea were present in prophetic calls for justice and communal caring throughout Judeo/Christian scriptures and, I'd venture, in sacred writings of human societies much longer ago.

Too many sites to explore can be brought up about the phrase common good in this googolific universe. But the commonality, in terms of political behavior, is that a society, through its systems and institutions, enables all its members to live fruitful, healthy, and beneficial lives. I won't go into the negatives of this society that block such fulfillment; I'll just say I'd rather put my hand in someone else's hand than on my billfold, with my back against the wall.

*www.scu.edu/ethics/practicing/decision/commongood.html

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