

Sam Adams in Ferguson: A Reflection

By Jeffrey L. Pasley



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This summer as we were launching JMC’s new partner program here at the University of Missouri, our home state made one of its rare starring appearances in the international media, but not for reasons we would prefer. The killing of black teenager Michael Brown by white policeman Darren Wilson in Ferguson, Missouri, on August 9, 2014, sparked rioting, street protests and widespread unrest across the St. Louis area. It spurred me to reflect on the state of our constitutional democracy.

At a minimum, constitutional democracies should provide citizens with government that conducts their affairs peacefully and legitimately. In St. Louis County, this test was not met.

Upsetting as they were, the protests and violence in Ferguson should not be seen as especially new. The protests of the unruly crowd have deep roots in the Anglo-American political tradition. The Founders would have understood, if not approved. In their time, violence in the streets, including property destruction and looting, was part of the expected repertoire of actions through which public opinion could be expressed, especially by the common people.

“When the passions of a multitude become headstrong, they generally will have their course,” wrote Samuel Adams. “A direct opposition only tends to increase them.” Sam even admitted to the belief that disorder might occasionally even be necessary, and rational, when liberty was in the balance. He knew that the Patriots would never have stopped the Stamp Act without the Stamp Act Riots to deter any officials who might consider trying to implement the law.

The possibility that heavy-handed or unjust law enforcement tactics might inspire street-level outrage was known to the Founders as well. For most of the decade leading up to the Revolution, major American towns were patrolled by redcoated British regulars. By all accounts, the men of the Boston garrison were quite right to feel threatened by the angry, rock- and ice-throwing crowd they confronted on the evening of March 5, 1770; when they fired their weapons, the resulting tragedy was labelled the Boston Massacre, and the soldiers were quickly arrested.

If Twitter had existed in 1770, Paul Revere and Sam Adams would assuredly have used it to fan the flames that burned in American hearts against troops who looked

and talked like them, but increasingly seemed to act more as occupiers than protectors. Instead of hashtag #massacre, they had to content themselves with Revere's famously slanted engraving, with brightly-colored British coats and spilled American blood.

The American revolutionaries abhorred the idea of being subjected to authorities who were unaccountable and alien to their communities, who could hurt and punish them with impunity.

The creation of a new nation, and eventually a constitutional republic with democratic institutions, relieved many of these fears, and cast riots and most other types of political violence in an increasingly unfavorable light. In a properly functioning democratic polity, the original architects of the American party system argued, violence was no longer necessary, though it was not until very deep into the 20th century that it was completely removed from the repertoire of American politics.

But as we have discovered, many local communities in modern America are far from properly functioning democratic polities. North St. Louis County, for instance, teems with small municipalities where the governments and public agencies have been allowed to become grossly unrepresentative of and disconnected from the populations they serve.

Many factors contributed to producing this situation, but a healthier constitutional democracy might have prevented or ameliorated it. If the local government in Ferguson had been engaged with its citizens and the people of Ferguson had been participating fully in its elections and deliberations, the misunderstandings and hostilities evident now might not have been quite so profound.

Historians and political scientists cannot do much to address entrenched social ills, but one problem I hope we can address is the profound indifference-to-hostility that many Americans today, of all backgrounds, seem to feel toward our democratic institutions.

In the face of its many financial and political challenges, the educational system at all levels has retreated from the teaching of civics, and political thought and history, in favor of other priorities. Regarding the Founders, students know names and faces, and a couple of scandalous factoids, but little of substance.

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