

Conflicts Among Political Philosophies: “Human Rights”

Dr. Balint Vazsonyi, founder/director, Center for the American Founding

Attendees at the 2002 World Family Policy Forum heard one of the last addresses by Dr. Balint Vazsonyi before his untimely death a few months later. Dr. Vazsonyi, a world-renowned concert pianist, was a Hungarian refugee who fled to America following the 1956 uprisings in his country. He had an innate ability to understand the minds and hearts of the American founding fathers. This understanding was invaluable in his work as a scholar, a historian, a writer, and a director of a foundation. His motive for presenting this address was to give people from other nations insight into how Americans think and why they do many of the things they do—including the reasons behind many of our public policies. This paper is actually a transcription of his oral presentation, which was given without notes. We have also included some of his remarks from the question and answer discussion. We express our deep appreciation to his widow, Barbara, for her help on this transcript. We offer her our deepest condolences. Her husband was a true statesman and will be deeply missed by many.

[Due to taping problems, the first few minutes of the speech were not recorded.]

... [the French] revolution, and what is it that they remember? They remember the destruction of a hated building, the Bastille, where people had been imprisoned. I will never forget my astonishment when I first went to Paris. I wanted to see this Bastille that is being commemorated every year. I was told, of course, that there is nothing there to see—it is a square now, with a monument. What is being commemorated is the destruction of something. By comparison, what is commemorated on the Fourth of July is something that is still very much with us—America’s independence. And that should get me to the point I am trying to make: the four countries that practiced political philosophy came up with two very different philosophies.

There was the English philosophy, which, of course, was inherited and further developed, perfected, and made universally available by the Americans; I think it is okay to call it Anglo-American, because that is what it is. Then there was the French version, which was inherited and further developed by Germans in the late eighteenth, then nineteenth, and early twentieth centuries, so perhaps it is legitimate to call it Franco-Germanic philosophy. Let me hasten to say that this is not to suggest that every Frenchman and every German necessarily adheres to the Franco-Germanic philosophy and that every Englishman is with the Anglo-American one. It is not like that. We are talking of something that is predominantly true—typically French and German. Writers of political philosophy, sociology—whatever we call it, were on that side, and typically those writings in English on this side. But there were notable exceptions. Voltaire for instance, who was as French as they come, was so enamored of British ideas that a warrant was issued for his arrest as a result.

Montesquieu, also French, was so enamored of British ideas that he actually misunderstood them and wrote about the separation of powers in Britain that never existed there. The American founders read and, through Montesquieu, adopted what they thought was a British idea. The outcome is good, so who cares. In any event these are the two grand waves of ideas. Why are they so different?

The first topic is human rights—very interesting when you take a concept such as rights and start putting qualifying words ahead of it, such as human, social, ecological, economic, cultural. All these various rights! It is interesting to ask the question, “Where do they come from? Who says they are there?”

You see, on the American side a very interesting solution was found to this, which is why they only spoke of rights, with no qualifiers. Look at what actually became the most important American document (and this is not to underrate the universal significance of the Declaration of Independence, but if it hadn’t been followed by the document I am about to name, it would have become an interesting episode in the history of the world rather than the determining factor that the United States of America is today and has been for some time).

I am talking of the Constitution of the United States which is no longer some beautiful ideas being proposed, but *laws*, actual words—black on white—for all to see, laws by which a nation has successfully survived through internal crisis and assaults from abroad—through war and peace. This constitution has stood the test of time.

What does this constitution say about rights? Very interestingly, it does not propose that its authors were granting the citizens of America rights. If you look at the actual wording, it simply recognizes the rights which *preexist* the writing of the constitution; this is why it says that Congress shall make no law to infringe upon the rights of the people, or to restrict the rights of the people, or to violate the rights of the people. In other words, those rights are there. And of course, the Declaration of Independence laid the foundation by saying that we hold these truths to be self-evident, that we are all endowed with certain rights.

The Franco-Germanic philosophy, rather than recognizing reality, was always engaged in wanting to create a better world. Now you say to yourself, “That is wonderful. What is wrong with that?” Well, if you asked the 100 million people at least, if not more, who have died as a result of others trying

to create a better world, I think they would tell you there is a lot wrong with it.

The fact is that the truly excellent intellectuals of France and Germany—and goodness knows, the contributions of these two countries are legion in every facet of life—have a tremendous desire to tell the rest of the world how to be. In other words, rather than taking reality as the British and Americans did and trying to make the best of it, the Franco-German thinkers want to create a world which they believe is going to be better for everyone. Some of them are idealists; others simply seek power by saying to the people, “We will do everything that is good for the people,” because they know what is best for the people.

When you look at human rights and economic rights and all these other rights, there is a kind of logical question to be asked, “If there are human rights, are there also animal rights?” And, of course there will be some people who will tell you that there are. The fact that there is no way to stand up to an intellectual challenge never bothers these people. The problem is that if you take it upon yourself to grant people rights, then you have taken it upon yourself to be the arbiter of other people’s rights, which the American founders never did, and the U.S. Constitution never proposes. This is extremely important to understand, because so much is being done in the name of human rights, and it sounds so good. This has been the problem. Everything the French and German thinkers write—or most things—sound so good, so nobody really scratches the surface and asks, “What’s there, underneath?”

Let’s look at something that’s now in the news every time you open the papers: the International Criminal Court. Europeans and many others don’t understand why the American government has a problem with that. Isn’t that a beautiful idea? An international court? All of the peoples of the world coming together and judging those who fall short, who have done terrible things, and meting out the appropriate punishment? The trouble is that if you scratch the surface, we have to ask upon *whose* authority is this court constituted, upon *what* authority, *who* will be the judges, and *who* will be the members of this wonderful international community? There are all sorts of people whom we know to be less than ideal members, less than lovable members, of this community. Will they also be sitting on the judge’s bench? One doesn’t even have to go this far, and this is the problem.

I realize that I am speaking to an audience from many countries, an audience that believes that the United Nations in itself is a source of wonderful ideas and wonderful deeds. Often it is. The trouble is that when we look for the authority not to help people, but to tell people how to be, that authority is only there in the writings of philosophers.

You see, what the American founders never did was to sit in a room—perhaps a windowless room—and write pages

and pages about how other people should be, and how other people should live their lives. Coming to Provo and what you see around you here, the fascinating thing is that experience tells us that people will do their utmost and people will do their absolute best if they know that the results will be as free from interference as possible, because then they know that they can enjoy the fruits. Their children, grandchildren, and all those around them can enjoy the fruits, and that means that government cannot lay its hands on it. But that requires a system—and this is really what the American system is—a system of self-government.

That is the price of liberty.

I think it’s fair to say that not everybody, not every nation, and not all people are particularly interested in self-government, which is—as much as it sounds like a blessing—a really difficult job. It’s a job people have to perform every day. And it is not by accident that it should be an American university where this kind of meeting is convened. Many of these meetings are at such places. I’ll never forget the first time I gave a lunchtime speech in Washington, D.C. One hundred and twenty people were sitting there, and I said to myself, “Here I am, an immigrant, speaking with an accent, not even a professional political speaker. I am a pianist by profession and just have some ideas I’d like to talk about. One hundred and twenty people who have never laid eyes on me before give up their lunchtime and sit there and listen. Why?” I don’t know if I would be there, but Americans are interested because it is part and parcel of self-government that you are interested in these things. Whether you are a garage mechanic, a carpenter, a university professor, or anything, you devote a part of your life to thinking about these things and, if called upon, to doing something about them. This self-government is really the key, I believe, to America’s success.

Self-government is not in the vocabulary of French and German philosophers. The sad fact is that they always talk about “power to the people,” but really the people are simply being used to give power to those who organize the people. All you need to do is look at the most famous—or infamous—examples of Franco-German political philosophies, such as the Soviet Union, and you really have to ask yourself whether Lenin was ever particularly interested in giving power to the people, or Stalin. No, they wanted power for themselves, and they found a way to let the people do the work for them so that they could acquire that power. That is the difference between these two systems.

Now I already spoke about the fact that *human rights* is a difficult term because it is nebulous and one doesn’t know what the source of it is. You can have a declaration, and, indeed, there is one, but is that really a source of rights? Who says so? Who guarantees it? And by signing a document will people actually have rights? Or do we look at the American

way where government—or the founding document of the country—simply recognizes that these rights are everybody's rights, which preexist government.

You see, here comes the big point. If government didn't grant those rights, it can't take them away either. Whereas if people grant rights to people, then those same people can and, let's face it, do take them away. And you look at France—again, let me emphasize, a country of incredible contributions in all sorts of fields. Since its revolution, they have had no fewer than five republics with that many constitutions. They are now in their fifth republic, and nobody thinks for one moment that it is the last, which shows that if you have a revolution which simply destroys, as was the case in 1789, and you say to yourself, "Let's figure out afterwards what we do with the rest," then that is not going to have very lasting and dependable results.

And that brings me to the main subject of this conference, which is the family. We know that the family is experiencing difficulties as an institution. And of course it experiences difficulties right here in the United States as well. So you might ask yourself: What's this big thing about American political philosophy? America has as many problems with the family as the rest of the world, and in some places, more.

Well, for a long time Americans really didn't think they needed to look at the fundamentals, because America's founders had taken care of that way back in 1787, and the years following. But in the mid-1960s, a major assault on the Anglo-American way of thinking began by those who thought that the Franco-Germanic way was better. That is the ongoing struggle in America, and that is where the family comes in.

You see, I mentioned that the Franco-Germanic idea is "Let's dispense with the old, let's destroy it, sweep the field clean, and let's not worry about what happens afterwards—we'll figure out something." I am afraid that is exactly what is happening with the family in the hands of those who, for some reason—and probably unbeknownst to them—have signed on to the Franco-Germanic way of thinking. "Let's destroy the family, it's an old thing, let's call *everything* a family. It doesn't matter, the whole thing doesn't matter, let's just dispense with it and we will figure out something." Well, you see, what happened in America at the founding of the country is that they figured it out and presented it to the people and asked the people whether they would agree before any of the changes were actually introduced. That is not what is happening with the family. What is happening is that we are losing this vital building block, which not only has proven itself over a very, very long time, but also is something that connected the world, because the family unit was so similar in its composition in so many places in the world.

America has become one of those countries where the family is whatever anyone says the family is. How that is

going to provide a place in society, and how that is going to serve the happiness of the adults in it, and the future of the children is something that its detractors are not particularly worried about. You obviously are, which is why you are here, which is why this conference is taking place, and which is why it is such a privilege to be here and listen to your deliberations.

Q & A with Balint Vazsonyi and Thomas Krannawitter

Balint Vazsonyi: What incredible luxury to have your attention, and to listen to the learned talk, and to have all the time that is left this morning to exchange ideas. Indeed, I hope very much that most of the remaining time will be spent with everybody speaking to this, because I am sure that between the two of us we said plenty of things with which you, if not disagreed strongly, at least want to attach some equally strong question marks. It would be wonderful to have an opportunity to hear those and to turn this into a conversation rather than a series of lectures.

When my wife and I moved to Washington in 1995, as newcomers to the political scene, I soon became aware of the very, very important work of the Claremont Institute and had the opportunity to meet with some of their important thinkers, by about 1996 or so. It became quite apparent that as similar as our views appear to be, there is a very important—well, now I won't call it disagreement—but certainly a divergent view of looking at why America has succeeded. I hinted at that in my comments, and I will now use this opportunity to emphasize it, because I think it is relevant to the whole human rights discussion. The Claremont Institute has always been extremely vocal about the tremendous importance of the Declaration of Independence. It has created an enormous web site where people can really learn everything they need to know about the Declaration of Independence. I remember the very first conversation I had with the then vice president of the Claremont Institute at an informal lunch, just the two of us in Washington. He asked me—and he had every right to ask me, I was such a novice—why I keep talking about the Constitution. Didn't I realize that the really important document is the Declaration of Independence? It has a great deal to do with what I said, because interestingly enough, if you would sit together in a room with a typical French thinker, a typical German thinker, an Englishman, and an American to discuss these things, they could actually all agree on the Declaration of Independence.

Where the disagreement would become apparent and obvious is the Constitution. That is why I think—and this is going to show you how this debate is an ongoing one in America, as befits a self-governing country—that here you have two speakers who would probably agree on a thousand different things, but we do have an ongoing debate in this emphasis, because I think the Constitution has given us the

law by which we all live. It really makes the difference—to put it bluntly and intending to insult no one's memory and no one's beliefs. There have been many instances in history where people were all enthusiastic and extremely—how should I say—spirited about certain ideas and got up in some public place and delivered a wonderful speech. This has happened all over the world. True, that among these, the Declaration of Independence has a very special place, not only because it is so beautifully written, but because its signatories incurred incredible risks and most of them paid a terrible price.

There is great human history in that document, and, of course, there is no way to challenge reasonably anything that it says, but what I hinted before and what I would now like to say with all due emphasis is that, had Americans stayed only with that declaration, they may have—and indeed almost have—gone the way of the French. Those of you who know history will remember that after the destruction of the Bastille and the beheading of this man and the other, there came a terrible period of one regime after another in France. Most of them didn't live to see a few months completed. And what they usually did was simply behead the representatives of the previous few months only to be beheaded themselves by the next lot. In only eleven years after beheading their king, the French had to resort to crowning their new emperor. It took eleven years from beheading their last Berber king to the crowning of Napoleon.

What did Napoleon do? He did the typically French and later German thing. And I say this with all due respect; I spent most of my life playing German music, so this is not a judgment over people. The historical and philosophical reality is that Napoleon decided that French ideas were so good that he would build an incredible army and go all over the world and tell people how they had to live whether they liked it or not. Those who resisted were simply put out of the way. These “wonderful” French ideas, for instance, included such silliness as going into a city and renumbering the houses consecutively. It was doing away with street names, and simply going from house to house and calling the first house “one” and then “two” and “three” and “four.” Every house had a number and, of course, without street names, there was absolutely no way for anyone to find their way in the city ever again until this madness was over. But, it was eleven years from beheading the king to crowning the new emperor—and actually he crowned himself, as you all know.

If you look at the same eleven years in the United States—in this new country, this funny place where people sat down and said, “Let's make a country”—in 1776 they declared independence and in 1787, again eleven years later, they sat together during an unforgettable summer and wrote the Constitution. Before that, there were all sorts of violent incidents and uprisings; the law was almost nonexistent in

many places. As we see from the correspondence of Washington and Jefferson, there was a dire need for America not to degenerate into the state into which postrevolutionary countries usually do. Then they wrote this Constitution, and what is really very interesting (please don't misunderstand what I am going to say here—I am not trying to paint anything in any particular color) is that while I was growing up in Soviet occupied communist Hungary, the Communists had no problem with the Declaration of Independence. They had a tremendous problem with the Constitution, because therein we have our guarantees of what government *cannot* do.

Now, incidentally, a great deal is made of the so-called Bill of Rights—the first ten amendments of the Constitution—because people overlook the absolutely incredible structure of government that the original seven articles contain. Few people stop and think today, “What incredible genius! Without any kind of a model or pattern, some men sat together in Philadelphia during a very hot summer and came up with this idea of three branches: legislative, executive, and judicial.” Just think of what it must have taken. It has to be called heavenly inspiration to come up with the idea that there would be two chambers in the legislature. One would be elected every two years, the other every six years, but only one-third of them, in order that two-thirds always provides continuity. I am talking of the United States Senate. So government is represented by people who change, if the people so desire, every two years.

In the states, however, the entire chamber changes every six years, but only one-third of it every two years.

Then there is an executive branch really consisting of one person, the president, and that election is every four years. And then there are the judges, the federal judges, who are there for life. We take this for granted. We don't even stop to think. Everybody talks about the Bill of Rights. Nobody sits down for a moment and asks what kind of genius does it take to come up with a structure of government like that. And so I would like to draw attention to those original seven articles. They are also the most concise things ever written and they really tell the story.

Now, a great deal was said about the need for morality, and this Conference on the Family has a great deal to do with that. There is no question that it is the Franco-Germanic political philosophy which eventually decided to separate the sexual act from its original purpose—to ensure the continued existence of the species—by achieving a total separation in the name of freedom (which it, of course, is nothing of the kind). The crisis of the family was brought about because it is now considered that any conglomeration of adults and children is recognized as family. Nature's intent has been quite different.

Before we begin to discuss this as a group, I would also add that if you look at what has happened—and I have to

tread very carefully here, because it is a wonderful thing for people of different countries to come together and do things together—but in the name of internationalism and international action, a great deal has been done in the world that is simply a way of shunning responsibility. A sovereign nation stands before the world, responsible for its actions. Not only is the nation responsible for its actions, but individuals within that nation have to be careful and mindful of the fact that whatever they do will reflect upon the entire nation. All you need to think about is the very recent and very tragic occurrence in the air on the border of Switzerland and Germany just a few days ago, when one Swiss air traffic controller apparently made a mistake which cost the lives of dozens and dozens of children as well as some adults. And Switzerland, which has built, over a very long time, a wonderful reputation, will have a really difficult job living down what one Swiss person has done in a moment of tragic confusion, or inattention, or just making the wrong decision.

But under the umbrella of internationalism, all sorts of things may come to pass for which simply no responsibility needs to be assigned. That is where I think people who represent international organizations have to be very careful and have to look for the philosophical roots of something that is being proposed, which is why I made so much of the difference between Franco-Germanic and Anglo-American philosophies.

Is all of this talk about the American founding and about these two different philosophies applicable and relevant today? I think it is more relevant today than ever before, and this is a wonderful point to be raised. Because if not relevant, why waste precious time on it? There was mention of the crisis of the West. I wonder if it is really not a particular crisis, but simply what many people regard Western civilization always having lived with, or having lived with the last three hundred years. In other words, if you look at the literature we read, the music we listen to, the paintings we enjoy, Western civilization looks like one homogeneous thing. But with regard to political philosophy, I believe this is an ongoing struggle about which two world wars have already been fought, and if you regard the cold war as a third one, then three wars have already been fought.

The picture is a little bit confusing because of the enmity between Germany and France and France always needing Anglo-American troops to save it from disaster. Philosophically, the split, the dividing line, is the English Channel, not the Atlantic Ocean between America and Europe. So the reason it is so very relevant today is because in America, the bastion of Anglo-American thinking, Franco-Germanic thinking has become rampant, especially since the 1960s. We have just had eight years of the Clinton administration and you look at somebody like Mrs. Clinton, who is more ideological than Mr. Clinton, and her thinking is totally Franco-Germanic.

There is not a shred of American thinking in the way Mrs. Clinton looks at politics, so this is a very strong thing.

And most importantly, I would say that you look at the two sides of any issue being proposed and debated and you will find that one side relates to Anglo-American political philosophy and the other side to Franco-Germanic. I have yet to see a third one. Now the world consists of many nations, and Europe is a very small spot, but for some reason the nations of the world have decided—at least for the time being—to live with institutions proposed by western civilization. That is why these things are extremely relevant.

Thomas Krannawitter: We should point out, I think, that it is true that the American founding took part in the latter part of the eighteenth century. But those principles articulated by the founders, from their point of view, were in no way bound to the eighteenth century. That is, they understood themselves to be reflecting on human nature, and human nature never changes, it is the same always and every where.

And so what I tried to describe in my talk was the founders' understanding of the conditions of free society, and those conditions are necessary always and everywhere, and so they are perfectly relevant to today.

I would also point out here that in America, over the course of the last century, a new kind of revolution has been underway. Increasingly, rights in America come to mean one of two things: First, they mean some kind of economic entitlement. This is not a natural right, this is not something you have by virtue of your nature, this is a demand on the property of someone else, and so these new kinds of economic rights or economic entitlements require a distribution of property—or a redistribution of property. It means taking private property from some and giving it to others, and that requires a large government. In effect, the idea of economic rights is opposed to the idea of limited constitutional government. The other way that rights are used today is as an expression of moral autonomy. One today has a right to just about anything one can imagine, anything one desires; any kind of appetite one has, we say you have a right to that, which in turn undermines the moral conditions necessary if people are to live freely under a limited government. I believe in many cases that what organizations like the United Nations promote as human rights are a kind of reflection of that new understanding of the rights you see in the United States. I spend most of my time thinking about American politics, and America today is no model of constitutional government. There is a crisis of constitutional government today, and so Americans—as well as citizens throughout the world—benefit by reflecting on those principles articulated in 1776.

Question: I think there is a broader sense than just Franco-Germanic or Anglo-American. Where do freedoms come from and how do you maximize them? Maybe that could be talked about in a broader sense instead of limited to the two philosophies. Also

the movement today is to take the idea of human rights and put almost anything under that umbrella. Where will these new views of human rights which require taking property from one to give it to another lead us?

Balint Vazsonyi: In fact, the two things you mention are very strongly connected and inseparable. In your first comment you suggested that we not confine this to Franco-Germanic and Anglo-American arguments and then you proceeded to ask a question as to why we are going down the path where entitlements are called human rights. These philosophies describe why this is happening. This is not an idea, an attempt to exclude other people. But let's face it, in most countries of the world people don't think about these things as a regular occupation, and that's not just outside Europe but in Europe. There is no such thing as Spanish political philosophy, or Russian political philosophy. These are large countries that produce lots of things, but they have not concerned themselves with this. Only four countries have, so why not identify the source? And you ask where do human rights and economic rights, etc. come from, and where are we going? And that is exactly the answer—they are going the Franco-Germanic way, which is the suggestion that those who don't have it should take it from the others. That is Franco-Germanic philosophy—socialism, communism. Call it whatever you like. I call it Franco-Germanic so as not to illicit a very strong emotional reaction by calling it communism, which is what it really is. Let's call it that. And you ask where it leads. We know where it leads. It leads to Nazi Germany, Soviet Russia, communist China, Cuba. That is where it leads; that is Franco-Germanic philosophy. That is where we are going, and that is what is combating the very successful Anglo-American philosophy. How does it do that? Why is it successful? Because it sounds wonderful: to promise to the people that they can take what they want from wherever they find it and just have it.

The American way is extremely inconvenient, extremely tiring. It's exhausting. It means not only that you have the right to govern yourself, it also means you are responsible for yourself. It means you can't simply go to the world and say, "I want to have a better car," or "I want to live in a nicer house, so give it to me." The American way is that you have all the legal framework to acquire it for yourself and keep it and hold it, but you have to do all the work. There have always been people, a few people, who simply for one reason or another at no fault of their own, couldn't fend for themselves. Americans from the word go—and there is plenty of evidence for this—found a way to deal with that through their communities and churches. But the Franco-Germanic way is to say that the state's primary function is to take from those who have it and give it to those who don't. At least that is what they say. But I can tell you, since I have lived there, that is the last thing they do. What they actually do is to make

sure that nobody has anything except the leaders. They have their special stores, they have everything, and everybody else starves. That's the Franco-Germanic way. That's where the U.N. and a lot of the world is going, so I think in order to see clearly, yes, you have to identify what this is because then you know what you are up against and you know exactly where you are going.

Thomas Krannawitter: I am reminded of a quotation from Winston Churchill, "The vice of capitalism is the unequal distribution of its blessing, and the virtue of socialism is the equal distribution of its misery."

Balint Vazsonyi: I think Thomas Krannawitter mentioned probably at least a couple of times that there is no suggestion that the American system is necessarily the ideal system for every country. The reason I say what I say as passionately as I do is to really invite you to think about these things and form your own opinions. I think that education about political philosophy, discussion and dissemination of the history of how certain people and why certain people succeeded, can inspire and lead to better conditions.

Thomas Krannawitter: I agree with that, and I would add that today we are very accustomed to thinking in terms of what we might call multiculturalism. Simply many different cultures, many different points of view. And so we talk about one nation or culture imposing itself on others, and that is why at the beginning and the end of my discussion I invited you to consider the political philosophy of the American founders from their point of view. They did not think that they were operating within a multicultural world; they thought that they understood something true—universally true—and they established a kind of government and they depended on a certain kind of character from their people to pursue their ends. I would argue that one thing we can learn from American history is that from the time of the American founding up until the middle of the twentieth century, America had the greatest antipoverty program in human history. When you go back and look at the American founding, America was not a wealthy, powerful nation, and yet in a mere 150 years we went from being this poor small group of people smashed up along the eastern seaboard to being the most powerful, prosperous nation on earth. How did that happen? I think this is what Dr. Vazsonyi is discussing here, and those are the things that I think people ought to be open-minded in discussing, not simply dismissing them as other cultures and other points of view.