

America 250 — Part 2

The Magna Carta and the Liberty Bell

Introduction

As America approaches its 250th birthday, I am focusing on the role of the Bible in shaping the thinking of our Founding Fathers and the founding generation. At this time, it is important to ask a question most people never think to ask: where did the ideas in the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution actually come from? The Founding Fathers didn't invent them out of thin air. They inherited them—from centuries of legal tradition, from biblical law, and from documents like the one we're focusing on today: the Magna Carta.

The Bigger Picture

June 15th of this year marks the 811th anniversary of the Magna Carta—the “Great Charter”—signed in 1215. Most Americans have heard the name. Far fewer know what it actually said, or why it matters to us today.

But here's the thing: even the Magna Carta didn't emerge from nowhere. It had its own long history—shaped by Viking traditions, Anglo-Saxon law, other influences, but above all, the Bible. So, before we get to King John and Runnymede, we need to go back a little further.

The Anglo-Saxons and King Alfred

Around AD 450, Germanic tribes—the Angles and the Saxons—began migrating to Britain. These tribes already had a tradition of limited government. They were governed by a council called the *witan*—an assembly of free men—that served as both a legislature and a court. The king had real power, but it was shared power.

Over time, these Anglo-Saxons converted to Christianity, and the Bible began shaping their laws. The clearest example of this is King Alfred the Great, who reigned in the late 800s. Alfred was a scholar and a devoted Christian. He actually translated portions of the first five Books of Moses and the Psalms from Hebrew into the Saxon language.

More importantly for our purposes, Alfred compiled the first known law code for all of England—a document called the *Book of Doms*. The word “doom” was simply the Saxon word for law or judgment. And this law code didn't begin with the king's decrees. It began with the Ten Commandments from Exodus chapter 20.

Alfred introduced these by writing: “*These are the judgments which Almighty God Himself spoke to Moses and commanded him to keep.*”

His code also drew from the Sermon on the Mount and the Book of Acts. And the principles embedded in it would echo for centuries: that individuals have rights given by the Creator which government must protect; that liberty belongs to the individual, the family, and the church; that justice is equal for everyone under the law; and that government should be decentralized.

Winston Churchill, in his *History of the English-Speaking Peoples*, put it plainly. He wrote that Alfred's Book of Laws "attempted to blend the Mosaic Code with Christian principles and old Germanic customs."

We see that the Bible is a large part of the foundation everything else is built on.

The Vikings and the Rule of Law

It's also worth a brief mention of the Scandinavian tradition. As Christianity spread to the Viking peoples in the 900s, it combined with something already in their culture: governing councils open to all free men. In Iceland in particular, there are detailed written records of these assemblies. The Icelanders had a remarkable principle for the time—*no king, except the law*. Other Scandinavian countries similarly placed limits on the power of their monarchs.

The point is this: long before 1215, there was already a tradition in the Western world that no one, not even kings, were above the law. The Magna Carta didn't create that idea. It gave it a landmark expression.

King John and the Magna Carta

Now, to 1215. You may know King John from the Robin Hood stories—the greedy, scheming Prince John while Richard the Lionheart was away. That reputation reflects the historical reality. John was Richard's younger brother, and when he took the throne, he ruled with a heavy hand.

He was constantly at war in France, and to pay for those wars he raised taxes, sold church offices, and charged outrageous fees for access to the courts. He squeezed everyone—the barons, the church, the common people.

Finally, the barons had enough. They turned for counsel to Stephen Langton, the Archbishop of Canterbury—himself a brilliant man who is also credited with dividing the Bible into the chapters we still use today. Historians believe Langton had a major role in actually drafting what became the Magna Carta. Again, using the Bible as a primary reference.

At a swampy meadow called Runnymede, about 20 miles west of London, the barons confronted King John and forced him to put his seal on their demands. The document they produced—the Great Charter, in Latin—the *Magna Carta*—did something remarkable. It set down in writing that the king was under the law, not above it. It established due process. It prohibited the abuse of royal power. And it warned that if the king failed to honor its terms, he would be compelled to.

That principle—the rule of law, binding on king and commoner alike—is the Magna Carta's greatest gift to history.

Later interpreters in the 1600s read it as guaranteeing trial by jury, prohibiting taxation without representation, and empowering representative assemblies. Sir Edward Coke, one of England's greatest legal minds, wrote extensively on the Magna Carta—and his writings were studied carefully by John Adams, Thomas Jefferson, and James Madison.

When Britain imposed the Stamp Act on the American colonies, the Massachusetts Assembly responded that it was—quote—“*against the Magna Carta and the natural rights of Englishmen*,”

and therefore, according to Lord Coke, null and void.” They weren’t reaching for a new idea. They were claiming an old one.

From Magna Carta to the Bill of Rights

The connections between the Magna Carta and our founding documents are direct and specific. Here’s one example.

Clause 1 of the Magna Carta states: *“the English Church shall be free, and shall have its rights undiminished, and its liberties unimpaired.”*

Compare that to the First Amendment: *“Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof.”*

Eight hundred years apart. The same idea.

Churchill said of the Magna Carta: *“Here is a law which is above the King, and which even he must not break. This reaffirmation of a supreme law and its expression in a general charter is the great work of the Magna Carta.”*

And Coke put it more simply: *“The Magna Carta will have no sovereign.”*

The Liberty Bell

Which brings us to the Liberty Bell—and to a verse of Scripture most people don’t realize is inscribed on it.

In 1681, William Penn founded the colony of Pennsylvania on explicitly biblical principles. His founding charter declared a “Year of Jubilee” every fifty years, drawn directly from the law God gave Israel in the book of Leviticus.

In 1751—exactly fifty years after the charter—the colonial government commissioned a bell for the Pennsylvania State House in Philadelphia. The inscription they chose for it came from Leviticus 25:10:

“Proclaim liberty throughout all the land to all its inhabitants.”

The bell sat largely unnoticed for years. But on July 8th, 1776, it was rung to call the citizens of Philadelphia together for the first public reading of the Declaration of Independence. And from that moment on, it became the Liberty Bell. From Moses to Alfred to the barons at Runnymede—to the Founders in Philadelphia. The thread runs clear.

Closing

As we mark 250 years of American independence, we’re not just celebrating a political event. We’re standing at the end of a very long line—a line that stretches back through centuries of men and women who believed that God, not government, is the source of human dignity and freedom.

The ideas in our Declaration and our Constitution were not invented in 1776. They were inherited, refined, and entrusted to us.

Let’s close with the words the Apostle Paul wrote to Timothy:

“I exhort first of all that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and giving of thanks be made for all men, for kings and all who are in authority, that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and reverence. For this is good and acceptable in the sight of God our Savior.” — 1 Timothy 2:1–3

Additional resources:

Many resources for studying the effect of the Bible on the Founders and Founding of America can be found at wallbuilders.com.

Another resource is Col. John Eidsmoe, [*The Historical and Theological Foundations of Law*](#), 3 volumes. Available on Amazon.com. This is an extensively researched and documented study of the history of the development of the central ideas inherent in the development of law in Western Civilization, and also the theological foundations of these ideas as well.