

**Founding of the American Republic: Russell Kirk's "The Roots of American Order":  
Chapter 3: "Glory and Ruin: The Greek World," Solon****II. Chapter 3: Glory and Ruin: The Greek World**

In philosophy, in warfare, in the early sciences, in poetry, in grace and manners, in rhetoric, the people who called themselves the Hellenes excelled all civilized folk who preceded them in time; in certain things, they have not been equaled in achievement. Yet the ancient Greeks failed in this: they never learned how to live together in peace and justice.

To most of the men who drew up the American Constitution, the ancient Greek commonwealths offered few precedents worth following. For philosophy and the arts, we turn to the glory that was Greece, as for religion and ethics we turn to Israel; but for a pattern of politics we emulate neither.

It was clear to the men who founded the American Republic that they had inherited and developed a social order better than Athens or Syracuse or Sparta or Corinth had ever known. What they found valuable in the Greek experience or order was a cautionary tale of class conflict, disunity, internecine violence, private and public arrogance and selfishness, imperial vainglory, and civic collapse: what to shun.

Speculative in all things, the ancient Greeks debated and wrote endlessly about political constitutions; yet no Greek commonwealth ever succeeded in establishing a good constitution that would endure long.

The Greeks had come near to conquering the known world; had they been able to develop any tolerable system of harmony within their culture, they might have succeeded altogether. No other race has produced, within a brief period, so many brilliant individuals as did the Greek people at the height of their glory.

The Greeks had a word for everything, we say. One of their most important words was *hubris* [ὕβρις, *hubris*: arrogance]—meaning man's overweening arrogance, at which the gods grow wrathful. And no wonder; for fierce local pride, a ruthless lust for power, and arrogant individuality run catastrophically through Greek history.

Notorious in the ancient world for their craftiness, often the Greeks overreached themselves, as individuals and as communities. The Hellenes were the cleverest people of antiquity, and the best soldiers; yet they spent their energies in destroying one another. It was impossible to unite the Greek city-states for any purpose, except in extreme emergency—if then.

Liberal historians and literary men of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries idealized the Greek civilization that they knew through its literary remains. Greece in general, and Athens in particular, those writers praised somewhat extravagantly as the birthplace of freedom, the sanctuary of the good and the beautiful, the source of rationality, the home of sweetness and light. Most leaders of the French Revolution indulged an indiscriminate admiration for classical Greece and Rome. But the leaders of the American Revolution seasoned their classical tastes with several grains of salt.

So far as they turned to classical examples for political justification or guidance, Americans paid more attention to the Roman Republic than they did to the Greek cities; and upon them, the direct influence of the Greek historian Polybius \pa-lib' ē-as\—writing about the Roman constitution—probably was greater than the combined influence of Plato's and Aristotle's political theories. The founders of the United States perceived that the institutions of a Greek *polis* [πόλις, *polis*: city], compact in territory and small in population, could not be imitated successfully in the sprawling expanse of the American Republic; but the Roman Senate might be another matter. Some of the American leaders, from colonial times up to the Civil War, had read the Greek and Roman historians in the classical languages; many more had read those works in translation. Most of them were well aware that whatever the accomplishments of the Greeks in the realm of the mind, strong and equitable political order had not been a Greek accomplishment.

Even today, looking up at the Acropolis of Athens, one sympathizes with the adulation of Greek civilization that prevailed among educated people through the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. If a civilization is to be judged by its beauty, the Greeks never have been excelled. The wrecked temple called the Parthenon [Παρθενών, *Parthenōn*: temple of Athena on the Acropolis at Athens] remains glorious, though a stone skeleton; the carved maidens of the Erechtheum [Ἐρεχθός, *Erechthus*: ancient agricultural god of Athens said to be raised by Athena; Ἐρέχθειον, *Erechteon*: temple of Erechthus at Athens] have a tranquility that the living Athenians never knew.

Down the centuries, the Acropolis [Ἀκρόπολις, *Akropolis*: “higher city”; central citadel of ancient Greek cities located on the highest point; in Athens it included the temples to Athena and Erechtheus] was plundered by its conquerors. Although now only a shadow, the Acropolis’ loveliness lingers as evidence of Greek imagination. Almost at the beginning of things, the Greeks knew everything. But how did they know it?

No one has answered that question satisfactorily. We do know the cause of the Greek’s political failure. The fiscal extravagance of building those temples upon the Acropolis was a principal cause of the Peloponnesian War. Americans who had read Thucydides’ *History [of the Peloponnesian War]* knew that this beauty had been bought with the price of blood. Pericles’ democratic imperialism had been succeeded by demagoguery, by oligarchy, and by defeat at the hands of old enemies. What is called by historians the “Great Age” of Athens lasted less than fifty years; American statisticians looked for greater permanence.

After all, the Parthenon was not built by a spirit of sweetness and light only, but also by a civic ambition that knew few scruples. And the gods worshipped upon the Acropolis were feeble models for a good social order. The work of Greek political thinkers “was vitiated by their failure to realize the extent and urgency of the claims of the individual soul. Men must be spiritually free before they can co-operate politically on the highest terms. In the last analysis the weakness of Greek political speculation can be traced back to the weakness of Greek religion.”

How far, indeed, did the Olympian deities of the Acropolis—those gods to whom magnificent temples were dedicated in every Greek city—offer true freedom of spirit to the Greek citizen? Those temples, and the gods’ images that stood within, were symbols of civic pride, and often of civic arrogance; these were “official” gods, but they did not speak to private conscience, or nourish the human longing for immortality, or clearly declare a norm for what men and women ought to be.

Unlike the Hebrew religion, which grew and unfolded over many centuries, the Greek religion did not develop beyond an early high promise—or rather, when Greek popular faith began to seem inadequate, it was supplanted by philosophy.

The Greek god of law and order was Apollo, the spirit of sunlit reason. But against the ordered world of Apollo there contended powerfully the Greek god Dionysius (dī-a-nish’ ē-us), the spirit of passion, unrest, release. In the most famous of Greek shrines, at Delphi (del’ fī), the temples of those two great gods stood side by side. Might the presence of the god of order restrain the magic of the god of excess?

If the Greek religion was not so gentle and sunlit as nineteenth-century writers often fancied it to have been, neither was the Greek civil social order tranquil: Apollo struggled with Dionysius. At Akragas (ä’ krä-gäs), the city’s first hideous tyrant, Phalaris (fal’ a-ras), is said to have roasted his enemies in a furnace of brass shaped like a bull. Throughout its independence, Akragas alternated between despotism and anarchy—and so it was with most other Greek cities. Out of Akragas’ population of more than two hundred thousand people, at the height of this *polis*, the large majority were slaves, many from Africa. (Among Greek political thinkers, only Plato was able to hint at a commonwealth not supported by slavery.) In most cities, the common expectation of the able bodied average citizen was that he might die by violence while still fairly young. Even in luxurious Akragas, these Greek lovers of beauty were hardy men, accustomed to spear and sword; doubtless they would have been astonished at the idyllic description of their existence which scholars would sketch centuries later.

Neither those wonderful representations of the Olympians in human form, in every city’s civic temples, nor the cults of darkness, mystery, and domestic hopes, closer to many Greeks hearts, could give to the Greeks such a principle of personal and public order as Jehovah had given to Israel. Within every city, class hostilities, political feuds, and private ambitions rent the fabric of civil social order every few years. The democracies were not less violent than were the tyrannies and the oligarchies. To the Greeks, “freedom” meant primarily the independence of their own city-state, not personal liberty in any high degree.

*Solon and the Athenian Polity.* Through his *Lives of the Noble Grecians and Romans*, Plutarch came to influence American’s thought more than did any other classical writer. Of all Plutarch’s parallel lives, none seemed more relevant to the necessities of the infant American republic than did his life of Solon (sō’ lan) [Σόλων, *Solōn*].

Poet, philosopher, religious teacher, patriot, hero, and practical leader of men, Solon possessed the intellect and the character for which the founders of the United States sought in their own generation. Had Solon never lived, perhaps the American Constitution would have come into existence; but that document might have been less strongly marked by the concepts of “checks and balances,” of compromise among interests and classes, and of “mixed government,” that Solon expressed and established in rising Athens. Long after Solon, these principles would be re-expressed by Plato, Aristotle, Polybius, Cicero, and other classical writers on politics; they would enter into the theory and the fabric of constitutional government throughout western Europe and throughout the New World.

Solon was a man of vision, a seer: he implied that truths were imparted to him from a source beyond his private rationality. His practical accomplishment, though large, did not matter so much as the high example of probity that he set, and the moral imagination which he introduced into the political order.

Athens during Solon's youth was an aristocratic state, with both the virtues and the vices of that condition of society. It had become true of Athenians that the love of money was the root of all evil.

The wealthy landowners desired still greater possessions; the poorer classes, envious, desired what they had not the ability to employ intelligently. Of the free citizens of Athens, many had fallen hopelessly into debt and were compelled to pay to their creditors one-sixth of the income from their property. The lot of the numerous artisans or craftsmen in Attica—nearly all of whom, being descended from aliens, did not enjoy full citizenship—was worse still, for they and their wives and children could be sold into slavery if they did not meet obligations to their creditors; thousands, indeed, had been so sold abroad. In such conditions, rebellion might be expected. Might a man of genius be found who could restore true community to the Athenians?

Such a one was the ethical poet Solon. This man proclaimed that only through righteous order, *eunomia* [εὐνομία, *eunomia*: loyalty to divine order], may the commonwealth endure. The leaders of the people have been corrupt and unrighteous, Solon wrote in one of his elegies. They have affronted *Dike* [δίκη, *dikē*: justice personified as a goddess], or Justice, and Justice will take vengeance unless the commonwealth mends its ways. Before affairs came to crisis in Athens, Solon had made his mark as patriot and diplomat. His being an inspired poet counted for more with the ancient Greeks than it would with modern American voters.

In the year 594, Solon was elected “eponymous archon” [ἐπωνόμος ἄρχων, *epōnumos archōn*: In Athens the chief magistrate who gave his name to the current year], or chief civil magistrate of Athens. The condition of the commonwealth being desperate by this time, everyone—the middle classes, the rich, the poor—agreed to confer upon Solon the authority of “arbitrator” or “reformer of the constitution,” with power to do whatever he might find necessary in political and economic concerns. Entrusted with such authority, nearly any other Greek would have made himself tyrant. Yet Solon, rejecting opportunity to seize absolute rule and vast wealth, healed Athenian society.

His practical reforms may be touched upon here. In economic policy, Solon abolished the old law that had permitted a person to mortgage his own body; he liberated all people who had been sold into slavery for debt, ransoming and bringing back from abroad those who had been shipped into other countries. He rejected the demand of the radicals that all lands be divided equally among Athenians, but he reduced debts and took measures to diminish the concentration of land-holding. He revised and revalued the coinage, and reduced the rate of interest. Without seizing the property of the wealthy, he succeeded in improving the condition of the poor and in restoring a tolerable economic balance in the commonwealth.

As for the political constitution, Solon affirmed the reality of a “polity”—that is, of a system of government which respects the interests and the rights of all classes and elements in the commonwealth. The reformed order which he brought about was neither an aristocracy nor a democracy, but a “mixed” government. He abolished the requirement of good birth for holding office, instead establishing qualifications and duties on the basis of wealth, as determined by annual income. Four classes of citizens were recognized, the wealthier being permitted to hold higher offices, the poorer to take lesser posts. These classes were related to military service, and thereafter the military strength of Athens depended principally upon the men of the middle classes, who could pay for the armor and weapons necessary for their service as heavy-armed infantrymen.

Solon increased the powers of the Assembly, or popular congregation of all free citizens. Executive authority, however, he left in the hands of the old Council of the Areopagus [*Ἄρειος πάγος*, *Areios pagos*: the “hill of Ares” (*Ἄρης*, *Arēs*: the god of war or destruction) at Athens that came to denote the council that met there], a kind of senate recruited from former religious, military, and civil magistrates. To make the assembly more effective, Solon created a new Council of Four Hundred, to prepare and guide the Assembly’s business. These old and new councils, Solon wrote, would save the Assembly from rashness: “The ship of state, riding upon two anchors, will pitch less in the surf and make the people less turbulent.”

To the Athenians, Solon had given a measure of democracy, but in the process had made himself unpopular with many—including some whom he had benefited greatly. There were those who heaped contempt upon him because he had not made himself absolute master of the city nor enriched himself at public expense. To them he replied in a sardonic poem:

Solon surely was a dreamer, and a man of simple mind;  
When the gods would give him fortune; he of his own will declined;  
When the net was full of fishes, over-heavy thinking it,  
He declined to haul it up, through want of heart and want of wit.  
Had I but that chance of riches and of kingship, for one day,  
I would give my skin for flaying, and my house to die away.

Having promulgated his code, Solon (who declared his laws would bind the *polis* for a hundred years) left the city for a decade.

A man may teach as much by what he is as by what he says; and so it was with Solon. When he left Athens for ten years of wandering, he declared that he would be judged by Time, not by men of his own hour. By Time has he been judged and found noble and righteous.

Most men have a rough way with principles of righteousness. No sooner had Solon gone abroad than self-seekers endeavored to break in upon his reformed constitution. By the year 561, an early friend of Solon’s, Peisistratus \pī-sis’ tra-tas\, succeeded by cunning in making himself tyrant of Athens. He was dislodged, but would return to power. Solon had returned to his native city in the midst of these new troubles. He opposed Peisistratus with his accustomed intrepidity; when all other adversaries of the usurper fled, old Solon went into the marketplace and exhorted the citizens to overthrow the tyrant. No one stood by him, so Solon returned to his house, laid his weapons in the porch, and declared that he had done with public affairs; he would not flee. It was the folly of the citizens, he told his countrymen, that had surrendered the Acropolis a second time to Peisistratus; men’s vices, not the gods’ malice, undo righteousness:

If now you suffer, do not blame the Powers,  
For they are good, and all the fault was ours;  
All the strongholds you put into his hands,  
And now his slaves must do what he commands.

Herodotus would write that Solon, in his travels, had told King Croesus \krē’ sas\ of Lydia that no man should call himself happy until the hour of his death: “In every matter it behooves us to mark well the end: for oftentimes God gives men a gleam of happiness, and then plunges them into ruin.” But Solon himself had ordered his soul and his acts consonant with the order of the universe. Dying full of years and honors, and leaving a model of righteousness to mankind, Solon was happy in the hour of his death, if ever man was.

Once political parties took form in the United States, both the disasters of Greek political experience and the achievements of Greek philosophy instructed the leaders of parties that their own new polity must be an enlarged form of Solon’s “mixed government.” The American constitutions would surpass Solon’s in their elaborate checks and balances; they would establish for the nation and in the several states a system of representative government on the British pattern, rather than the direct democracy that had collapsed even in little Attica. And *nomos*, the inherited law, the instrument of justice, had few sophisticated opponents in America.

The civilization that arose in Greece was not effaced altogether by its political catastrophe; Washington’s classical architecture is some evidence of that. Still better evidence of the Greek genius is the incorporation of Greek philosophical and historical knowledge into American social institutions. Ideas are deathless, Plato had said often: material forms, which pass away and rise again in new aspects, are delusory. Surely the ideas of Hellas still breathe life into American order, though material Hellas has become remote and legendary.

Today we have examined from Dr. Kirk's writings how the cultures that emerged from Jerusalem and Athens, and specifically from Moses and Solon, influenced the founders of our great republic. The truths that these two men expressed were studied and adopted by the men who developed the foundation upon which our freedoms are anchored.

For two hundred and thirty years our nation has sent men into battle to defend these truths with their very blood and often their lives, and in almost every case with a disposition of unyielding intrepidity. Today we recognize their efforts and their sacrifices. As we remember their contributions to the defense of our client nation and the benefits we enjoy, we lift our thanks to a merciful God Whose enduring love has recognized their efforts and blessed our land. Our duty is to continue our pursuit of truth so that our Founder's efforts to provide freedom and the one million plus who have died to defend it will not have done so in vain.

Recommended books by Russell Kirk:

***The Conservative Mind: From Burke to Eliot:***

<http://www.amazon.com/gp/product/0895267241/qid=1148778325/sr=12-1/104-7600365-2043141?s=books&v=glance&n=283155>

***The Roots of American Order:***

<http://www.amazon.com/gp/product/1932236082/qid=1148778325/sr=12-2/104-7600365-2043141?s=books&v=glance&n=283155>

***Decadence & Renewal in the Higher Learning:***

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