ABOUT REVOLUTIONS

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By Avedis Kevorkian, Philadelphia PA

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In that far-ranging essay "The Second American Revolution," the good professor asks many questions--answers some, and leaves others for his readers to answer--and he makes many comments. For safety's sake, I will confine my comments to just one aspect of his essay.

He asks why revolutions fail or--though he didn't use the term--gnaw at their own livers after achieving a "victory." By their nature, revolutionaries are malcontents. Therefore, if enough of them are malcontented at the same time, they unite to overthrow the common enemy--the government in power.

If they win, each person feels that it was his effort and his policies that led to victory and, therefore, it is he who must run things. That's when they fall out.

Perhaps he should have asked: "Why do revolutions succeed?" Had he done so, he would not have had to spend so much time finding reasons for those that failed.

That the "falling out" did not happen with the American Revolution (though there were a few unhappy people--the angry unpaid soldiers who did the actual fighting who forced their way into Independence Hall through the front door as the delegates escaped out the back door and windows, Shay's Rebellion, the Whiskey Rebellion) is because, as we look back, we realize that the leaders of the American Revolution were giants intellectually and, more than anything else, idealistic realists or realistic idealists. They had combined their dissatisfaction with the policies of the "Mother Country"--Britain--with a dream of a great new experiment, taking their examples from the teaching of the ancient Greeks and Romans and the more-recent French and English philosophers. And they were willing to compromise for the sake of the success of their dream. There is that famous moment when the delegates were discussing impeachment and many felt that the President should be exempted. George Mason, of Virginia, rose and asked: "Should he who is the chief legal officer of the nation be above the law?" The delegates looked at each other, shook their heads, and decided that not the President, not anyone, should be above the law. That provision of the Constitution, two-hundred years later, got rid of one president and scared the bejeezuss out of another. But, I digress.

The American "revolutionaries" sublimated their egos--all right, Vice-President Aaron Burr did conspire against his President, Thomas Jefferson, but he was doomed to failure the moment after he gave thought to the idiocy--and were more interested in the success of the enterprise than who was to get credit for its success. Thus, a new nation was not only born but also nursed into

becoming the great country that America once was.

Where the other revolutions that failed is because either the egos that had to be satisfied had came into conflict with other egos that had to be satisfied, or having eliminated the government/leader they didn't like, they had no idea of what to do next. Except that they were sure that they had to get rid of the others. Or, they forgot why they wanted to depose the government against which they fought. Oliver Cromwell, cited by Professor Pilikian, objected to the approach to governing by Charles I who became, probably, the last Divine Right Monarch. Then, after he deposed and beheaded Charles, Cromwell thought, "Hey, it ain't so bad being a Divine Right Monarch!" And, assumed the role. His son could not fill his father's shoes and the "experiment" failed and Charles' son took over--and talk about a swinging pendulum!

Arguably, every revolution in the world began as a result of the American--in one form or other--but the puzzle is why the revolutionaries didn't go the entire route and follow the American example--representative democracy rather than parliamentary democracy, compromise, written Constitution, checks and balances, respect for authority, respect for Law.

Professor Pilikian brings in such explanations for failure as Darwinism, "it's the way we are wired," the "God complex," etc., but these don't explain the success of the American Revolution. By the way. Thomas Jefferson, who knew a thing or two about revolutions, is recorded as saying that every country needs a revolution every thirty years--i.e., every generation!

For the good professor to suggest that an Obama victory would mark a "Second American Revolution." is to exaggerate the problem. What America needs is a return to its basic principles--enunciated in the Declaration of Independence and enshrined in the Constitution. Going back to its roots does not need anything revolutionary.

There is a marvelous scene in the Jules Dassin film, "He Who Must Die"--too long to discuss here except to say that there is an act of kindness by a few Greeks in the homeland toward the Pontic Greeks involved in the 1923 all-for-all Turkish exchange and who are trying to find a new home--when a child asks the village priest, "Is that a miracle?" and the priest replies, "Why should human kindness be a miracle?"

Paraphrasing the reply, "Why should returning to basics be a revolution?"

As to the other matters discussed by Professor Pilikian, I will quit while I think I am ahead. But I can't refrain from commenting that it is always interesting to learn what foreigners think of America--a law-professor friend in England and now Professor Pilikian.

Or, as Robbie Burns put it: "O wad some Pow'r the giftie gie us / To see oursels as others see us! / It wad frae mony a blunder free us, /And foolish notion."