A TALE OF TWO TEA PARTIES
Understanding the legacy of Samuel Adams, the father of the American Revolution, is key to understanding today’s movement to reclaim our constitutional government.

By Tony Perkins

Axes have frustrated Americans since before the nation’s founding. Recently, the tea party movement has brought renewed attention to how tax rates are hurting families and the companies where they work.

Of course, today’s movement is not new, but rooted in our nation’s founding. And the name—and values—of the first tea party leader might surprise you.

The modern tea party movement began with Rick Santelli’s famous rant on the floor of the Chicago Mercantile Exchange. CNBC carried him live on Feb. 19, 2009, as he protested the Obama administration’s new mortgage bailout plan: “The government is promoting bad behavior. This is America!” He called for another American tea party, and the rest is history.

Washington Examiner political analyst Michael Barone noted that Santelli’s plea was both economic and moral. Santelli said we should reward people “that can carry the water rather than just drink the water.”

Barone wrote that while Rick Santelli’s rant didn’t match the elevated prose of the Founding Fathers, the Founders’ “grievances against Britain, like Santelli’s complaints about the Obama administration’s policies, were rooted in moral considerations as well as economics.”

Morality and economics are inseparable. The Founders understood that the right to own property came from God, not government. The Eighth Commandment—“You shall not steal”—implies the legitimacy of property ownership.

Similarly, when the pursuit of material prosperity is severed from a belief in transcendent truth, it leads only to greed, avarice and even oligarchy—which leads to social unrest and ultimately a state-run economy that cannot provide prosperity.

Sustained and widespread prosperity is based on the wise use of resources, human initiative and respect for property and self-reliance. Jettison these principles and lose prosperity. That these principles are sound and good is a moral argument, plain and simple. And to speak in moral categories of good and evil, right and wrong, is to speak the language of revealed truth.

Perhaps most supremely, we value human life because of our national conviction that it is the gift of God. This is a profoundly theological statement, expressed in our country’s charter (the Declaration of Independence) and affirmed every time a child says the Pledge of Allegiance.

Thus, if we suggest that money alone will solve all problems, we not only affirm our belief in man’s mere materiality but also risk splitting the grassroots movement that has given such vitality and strength to the tea party.
The modern-day tea party reaches back into America’s past for inspiration, and to find the arguments and principles for limited, fiscally responsible government, we must do the same, remembering that a government big enough to give us all we want is also big enough to take all we have.

Who was the Rick Santelli of colonial America? A strong case can be made for Samuel Adams, the Massachusetts agitator who is rightly called “the father of the American Revolution.” If we want today’s tea party to have a lasting impact on the United States, who better to learn from than the man who helped organize and leverage the original Boston Tea Party?

SAM ADAMS OF BOSTON

In the 1770s, British leaders were profoundly arrogant toward the 13 American colonies. From import duties and taxes imposed at will to denying any genuine colonial self-government, the king and English leaders had demonstrated their unwillingness to respect colonial rights.

Many of the colonies’ best minds had become convinced that over a period of years the crown had developed an intentional strategy to deny them their God-given, natural rights as persons and their legal rights as British subjects. They would not accept this. Leading the fight against British enslavement was Samuel Adams of Boston.

Sam Adams may have been America’s first full-time politician. As a graduate of Harvard College, he had resisted his parents’ urgings to become a minister in the Congregational Church. He briefly served Boston as a tax collector, where his famously lax collecting made him a popular figure among those who owed. He briefly took up—and quickly abandoned—the study of law, but his 1743 master’s thesis for Harvard addressed whether it was lawful to resist a king if resistance was the only path to save a country.

Samuel Adams lived to work the levers of the political machine. Pauline Maier wrote in “American Scripture: Making the Declaration of Independence” that Adams viewed politics as a “ministry.” He started with the Boston town meeting, then branched out, using the colonial postal system for his “Committees of Correspondence.” From Boston, news of British depredations spread throughout the colonies.

Adams gave himself completely to America’s cause. He lived in a run-down house in Boston on the small income he earned as clerk to the Massachusetts House of Representatives. His second wife (his first died in 1757) tolerated his incessant politicking. His children loved and respected their father but knew better than to expect any inheritance save liberty.

Alexander Winston wrote in an American Heritage article that Sam Adams’ only indulgence was a shaggy dog, famed in Boston for biting redcoats! For himself, his needs were few.

Adams always deplored violence and decried several violent anti-tax gatherings that occurred in Boston. But as Edmund Morgan writes in “The Birth of the Republic,” Adams “went after what he wanted with relentless and frightening singleness of purpose,”
and he supported the protesters’ reasons, even if he opposed their actions.

A driving force behind Sam Adams’ impassioned speech and writing was his strong scriptural faith. Biographer Ira Stoll called Adams “the archetype of the religiously passionate American founder, the founder as biblical prophet, an apostle of liberty,” and “a man of deep religious conviction whose confidence, zeal, and endurance in the struggle for freedom were grounded in a belief that an intervening God was on his side. He was the moral conscience of the American Revolution, a man who never lost sight of the Revolution’s political and religious goals, which for him were intertwined.”

“The Forgotten Founders on Religion and Public Life” says that Adams, who read his Bible daily, knew that Scripture views monarchies negatively, showing Israel’s desire for a king as indicative of their sinful desires. God had designed a government for the Jews, Adams knew, but they had sinfully demanded “an absolute despotic monarchy” instead.

For years, the colonists had governed themselves by choosing trusted neighbors, men of character and ability, to govern them on councils and in state legislatures. As long as the people retained their virtue and courage, Adams believed they could not be subjugated.

As “The Forgotten Founders” says, Adams saw the conflict with England in biblical terms. The Stamp Act and all other British coercive measures were designed to force the Americans “to see themselves as the slaves of men; and the transition from thence to subjection to Satan, is mighty easy.”

His continual writing, speaking out and campaigning for freedom made him less than popular with King George III. The king disregarded the pleas of the colonists, many of which Sam penned.

Adams was a leader in the continent-wide resistance to the hated Stamp Act of 1765. Although he did not attend the Stamp Act Congress in New York, he used his Committees of Correspondence to orchestrate opposition to the oppressive measure. Faced with nearly unanimous American hostility, Parliament grumbled, but backed down.

SAM ADAMS’ ORIGINAL TEA PARTY
But the king was determined to bring the colonists to heel, and tea was the weapon he chose. He planned to stop the smuggling of tea into Boston, thereby breaking such noted merchants as John Hancock, Sam Adams’ close friend. Using the monopoly power of the East India Company, the king and Parliament shipped tea into Boston. This tea was to be taxed by Britain, but because it was subsidized, it would still be cheaper than the “free market” tea Bostonians were used to drinking.

Adams was quick to point out the insidiousness of the action. He urged Bostonians to reject the tea—and with it the British tax. He led Bostonians in the Old South Meeting House to pass a resolution demanding the ships in Boston harbor take the tea back to London. On the evening of Dec. 16, 1773, the Sons of Liberty, disguised as Mohawks, boarded the ships. They broke open 342 large chests of tea with axes and dumped the tea into the water.

All witnesses agree Sam Adams was no “Mohawk” that night. But that did not mean he didn’t encourage and publicize their efforts. Biographer Cass Canfield wrote that Adams exalted, “This is the most magnificent movement of all.” And he scotched all attempts to call this action a tea riot. He continually stressed that no property was damaged except the tea, which he claimed had been illegally kept in the harbor.

Britain reacted with fury. As soon as London learned of the Boston Tea Party, Parliament passed a battery of coercive acts (later known as the Intolerable Acts), closing the Boston port, revoking Massachusetts’ ancient charter and ordering that British officials accused of murder be tried in England. George III demanded this last measure despite the fact that Sam Adams’ “country cousin” John had ably and successfully defended British soldiers accused of murder following the Boston Massacre. British troops would be quartered within Boston’s homes, churches and shops. Bostonians would have to feed and bed them. And the southern border of Quebec would be extended to the Ohio River, thus annulling the historic land claims of Virginia, New York, Connecticut and Massachusetts.
SAM ADAMS IN CONGRESS

In response to British oppression in Boston, the colonists convened a Continental Congress in Philadelphia. It was the first time Sam Adams had been outside Massachusetts.Arriving in the British Empire’s second largest city with his cousin John, Sam Adams was apprised of the fact that many delegates to Congress viewed him apprehensively. There were divisions over independence. Many delegates were determined to work out their problems with England but firmly set against breaking with the mother country.

New Englanders were also suspect on religious grounds. The middle and southern colonies were religiously diverse. They were home to Baptists, Anglicans (Church of England), Quakers, Dutch Reformed, Lutherans and Mennonites. Would Sam Adams, that old New England Puritan, shun them?

Adams arose when the Congress first met in the autumn of 1774 and proposed daily prayers. New Yorker John Jay, an evangelical Anglican, objected. With so many “sects” represented, how could they agree on worship?

Sam Adams said he was no religious bigot and would gladly bow in prayer with any pious delegate who loved America. He proposed that Rev. Jacob Duche, an Anglican priest, lead the assembly in daily devotions. Cousin John seconded the motion.

Biographer Mark Puls wrote that Philadelphia patriot leader Joseph Reed later credited Sam Adams’ motion with allaying many concerns among the delegates. The Adamses had never brought off “a more masterly stroke of policy than in moving the Mr. Duche might read prayers. It has had a very good effect.”

The Anglican divine soon had serious cause for prayer as British warships threatened Philadelphia and, with shots fired at Lexington and Concord, the war began. King George III sent ships to burn towns along the Connecticut coastline and hired cruel mercenaries, Hessians from Germany, to fight with the British.

Despite the British attacks, sentiment in Congress and throughout the colonies was moving toward independence, not appeasement. Thomas Paine’s “Common Sense” pamphlet had sold 400,000 copies. That short work powerfully argued the case—in biblical terms—for independence.

From May through July 1776, Samuel and John Adams worked with Philadelphia carpenters, laborers and leaders of the “popular” party in Pennsylvania to circumvent John Dickinson, head of the Pennsylvania delegation in Congress who firmly opposed independence.

Sam Adams used his long-honed political skills to beat Dickinson: John Adams proposed a seemingly innocuous motion in Congress that called merely for the states to re-frame their governments since all officers had sworn loyalty to King George. This mild-looking measure forced John Dickinson and his reconciliation faction to side with the patriots or leave office, essentially forcing them to join the cause for independence or get out of the way.

Adams had recruited workers, farmers and Pennsylvania “Dutch” immigrants. Together, they brought about a new Pennsylvania political order. It was, indeed, the Keystone State.

Sam Adams had forged a strong alliance with Virginia delegate Richard Henry Lee, who finally offered a motion in Congress for independence in June. William Hogeland wrote in “Declaration” that Thomas Jefferson later reflected that “Samuel Adams was the man” responsible for the congressional vote for independence.

OF TEA PARTIES AND TALKING POINTS

Sam Adams agitated tirelessly against the British tyranny of “taxation without representation.” Many of Adams’ campaigns—boycotts, Stamp Act protests, the Boston Tea Party—were about various economic aspects of British misrule.

But Sam Adams did not believe men could live by bread alone. He deeply respected the rights of Americans to labor, enjoy the fruits of that labor and enjoy the full exercise of civil and religious liberty. To attempt to sever those connections is to cut the flower of conservative activism from its deep roots in the rich soil of Christian faith and religious liberty.

Thomas Jefferson knew that religious liberty was the foundation of all political liberty—he believed that when he authored Virginia’s Statute for Religious Freedom in 1786. And though he was no orthodox Christian himself, Jefferson reserved his highest praise for the man who was the father of the Revolution—Sam Adams.

To this devout Christian man, President Jefferson wrote, “I addressed a letter to you, my very dear & antient friend, on the 4th of March: not indeed to you by name, but through the medium of some of my fellow citizens, whom occasion called on me to address. In meditating the matter of that address, I often asked myself, is this exactly in the spirit of the patriarch of liberty, Samuel Adams? Is it as he would express it? Will he approve of it?”

The “letter” to Adams that Jefferson referred to was his own 1801 Inaugural Address. Has any American citizen been so honored by a newly sworn-in president? Americans ought to understand and honor the complete legacy of Samuel Adams as we work together to defend faith, family and freedom.

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