

*Starting to feel their oats*

# LIBERATING THE CART-HORSE

## GLENN BECK'S CONTRIBUTION

By Carrie L. Thatcher

*My daddy served in the army, where he lost his right eye. He flew a flag out on our porch till the day that he died. He wanted my mother, my brothers, my sister and me to grow up and live happy in the land of the free. Now this nation that I love has fallen under attack. A mighty sucker punch came flyin' in from somewhere in the back. Soon as we can see clearly with our big black eye, we'll light up your world like the Fourth of July.*

—TOBY KEITH

**K**EITH WROTE THESE WORDS FOR PATRIOTS IN the wake of 9/11. They were used to inspire servicemen and -women heading into harm's way. Today, those words could as easily be sung by everyday citizens, though in this case, the enemy is not a nation far across the ocean but the leadership in America's own backyard.

In the aftermath of the 2008 election, an unexpected cry came from a quiet corner of America—Main Street. Inch by inch, dime by dime, hard-working Americans became aware of a creeping encroachment; they felt abandoned, usurped, and disregarded. They had done nothing wrong. In fact, they'd done everything right: voted in elections, written their representatives, signed petitions, written letters to newspaper editors, and donated money to political candidates. But the battle against them seemed to intensify. More and more working citizens had begun to feel like Boxer, the cart-horse, in George Orwell's *Animal Farm*: valued only as far as they were willing to work, pay taxes, and cooperate.

They hadn't always felt this discontent. As recently as 1993,



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cart-horse Americans had waged a fierce battle against the health care plan the Clinton administration had tried to persuade Congress to enact. Both sides mounted an effective campaign, but when the final ballots were tallied, Main Street had won. More important, the citizens felt they had been heard.

This group of cart-horse citizens takes pride in being bedrock Americans. They look at their families, homes, private achievements as a validation of the American vision they've been taught. That vision is simple—any person who has the determination to work for a better life can succeed. How each person defines that achievement is an individual choice.

For years, the American Way had consisted of ordinary citizens electing other perceived ordinary citizens to represent them. Following such elections, the voters would return to their business of raising families and increasing America's prosperity through labor and ingenuity, confident that their elected officials would, as the Preamble to the Constitution states, “provide for the common defense, promote the general welfare, and secure the blessings of liberty.” That was the agreement. Simple and purposeful. In short, “The American Way.”

However, a strange thing happened on the way to 2008. In September 2001, the world—not just America—was rocked by terrorist attacks. “Horrorifying, devastating, earth shattering” were the first words used to describe our feelings on 11 September. But following those were the words “heroic, selfless, triumphant.” In the days following the attacks, Americans seemed to have regained purpose. Their purpose: common defense, general welfare, blessings of liberty. Tragedy had put everything on the right track again. But by December another feeling had begun to surface. Frustration. It began at the airports.

Following 9/11, the Office of Homeland Security was expanded to help secure America against any further attacks. It was a good idea. However, checking through an airport became a nightmare in short order. At first, citizens were willing to cooperate, though privately they may have won-

dered who was watching whom. Former Marine-turned-Tae Kwon Do instructor Bob Maves stood in line with team members to board a plane and watched an official confiscate a set of knitting needles from a kindly-looking grandmother. Incensed, he shared his frustration, “It wasn’t a ninety-year-old’s knitting needles that did us in,” he complained. “For me, I would want those needles on the plane. I might have to use them to defend myself.” In a small act of civil disobedience, he began telling his Tae Kwon Do students what type of ballpoint pen to carry with them on flights. “Those aren’t on the list yet,” he said.

The airports were secure, but our national borders surely weren’t. In 2006, Gray Davis, former governor of California warned, “We have a right as a country to say who comes into this country and who does not . . . only so many people can fit into a lifeboat or it will sink.” Other smaller, less obvious injustices were occurring as well: new tax codes for small businesses, mandates on local education, and skyrocketing gas prices. These and more began to take their toll.

Public officials, those elected by common citizens, seemed to have forgotten who had hired them. As citizens worked to voice their views through their representatives, they found their voices stifled. Phone calls were just routed to operators—how could anyone be sure messages were being passed along? Senators’ responses to citizens’ letters often read like form letters instead of thoughtful, personal replies. Months after writing to a governor, one woman received a response beginning “Dear Mr . . . .” The women kept the letter as a reminder of how thoughtless that leader had become.

By election time in 2008, cart-horse citizens had had enough. Frustrated with bank bailouts, misused funds, government fraud, and individual rejection, Americans cried out for change. Some citizens chose to vote a face fresh to politics into the office of President. Others chose to vote for one of the many independent candidates. Still others voted for a petite brunette and her running mate, “because she was just like them.” But the election did not correct the problem.

People who were watching the bigger picture realized the problem did not lie in politics alone but in the nation’s lack of understanding and education about its own origins. In 2005, historian David McCullough shared an example of the problem. “I had a young woman come up to me after a talk one morning at the University of Missouri to tell me that she was glad she came to hear me speak, and I said I was pleased she had shown up. She said, ‘Yes, I’m very pleased, because until now I never understood that all of the 13 colonies—the original 13 colonies—were on the east coast.’ And you

think: What in the world have we done?”<sup>1</sup>

There is a national need to educate. Though McCullough and other respected historians and political scientists have worked hard to do just that, it has taken a shock-jock named Glenn Beck to actually carry it off.

With his eccentric style and *Dead Poet’s Society* teaching style, Beck began to teach the floundering masses how to swim in political waters. Starting from Solomon’s wise counsel in Proverbs 29:18, “Where there is no vision, the people perish,” Beck began on 12 March 2010 to restore a vision to Americans with his 9/12 Project. He reminded people of what we as a nation had felt on 12 September 2001, rehearsing the heroic acts of firefighters, airline passengers, and everyday folk across the land. He helped



viewers recall how they’d felt, wherever they had been, nearly a decade ago.

If Beck could sing, he might have sung Alan Jackson’s “Where Were You When the World Stopped Turning on that September Day?” However, in his own words, he helped viewers remember their own selfless acts. He brought back to them the pride of being a nation that everyone else in the world turns to when in trouble. He tried to help us recall the willingness we’d had to look one another in the eye and be friendly, pointing out that we hadn’t needed anyone to tell us how to assist or react. We’d done it naturally. The blood we’d donated was voluntary, the prayers we’d offered for the living and the dead had been sincere offerings of individual hearts, the collection drives for socks for soldiers, bake sales, and other fundraisers had not been government-ordained. Those acts were part of being an American, as they have been for a long time. James Wood points out that in 1831, while travelling

through the United States as research for his *Democracy in America*, Alexis de Tocqueville “admired [America’s] provincial decentralization, marveling at the busy way every small township managed its own affairs and happily organized committees and meetings on every subject.”<sup>2</sup>

Building on that vision, Beck created a plan of action—The 9-12 Project. In its introduction he states, “This is a non-political movement. The 9-12 Project is designed to bring us all back to the place we were on September 12, 2001. The day after America was attacked, we were not obsessed with Red States, Blue States, or political parties. We were united as Americans, standing together to protect the greatest nation ever created.”

With that, smaller political organizations that had been struggling to be heard were given a support system. From all over the nation, they began connecting under the banner of the 9-12 Project. It was the old adage of how a bundle of sticks is much harder to break than a single stick is. The cart-horse Americans found a unity they had previously lacked. Pooling their skills with Beck’s, they became a flotilla of ships and barges heading down the treacherous waters of a democratic republic.

Though there was much to do, teaching the populace about America’s founding ideals was the first priority. Without knowledge, no project can succeed. “Education is the key,” writes Beck, “and not just for our children.” David McCullough had said the same thing five years earlier: “We have to do several things. First of all . . . we have to know who we were if we’re to know who we are and where we’re headed.”<sup>3</sup> Four decades earlier, John F. Kennedy had similarly said, “There is little more that is more important for an American citizen to know than the history and traditions of his country . . . The American past is a record of stirring achievement in the face of stubborn difficulty.”<sup>4</sup>

Beck chose an obscure book to begin the education process. W. Cleon Skousen’s *The 5000 Year Leap*. But it worked. By introducing his viewers to this book, Beck succeeded in getting cart-horse Americans to read about the Constitution. Not since James Madison had published the *Federalist Papers* has such a large segment of the American population read a political science book. Though books about the creation of the Constitution have existed for two centuries, they have failed to gain the rapt attention of the masses. But *The 5,000 Year Leap* breaks the mold by offering a condensed, quick-read. Whatever its merits or failures, it is a good beginning.

From there, Beck did what any good student, trial lawyer, teacher, or physician would do—he dug more deeply. He broadened his personal reading list by diving into such texts as *Samuel Adams* by Ira Stoll, *American Prophet* by Bruce Feiler, *Original Intent* by David Barton, and *Lies the Government Told You* by Andrew Napolitano. According to Steven F. Hayward, author of *The Fall of the Old Liberal Order*, Beck is willing to wade into political writing that is “often dense and difficult, but Beck not only reads it, he assigns it to his staff.”

As *The 5,000 Year Leap* spread through private book clubs, community gatherings, and neighborhoods, the seed of Beck’s purpose began to take root. The purpose was knowledge on a mass scale. Because if *Animal Farm* is to be believed, knowledge is the key to a successful society. *The 5,000 Year Leap* created a hunger for knowledge.

Of their own accord, cart-horse citizens began to read more about the Constitution and its governing principles, not just in the books Beck suggested. They began inviting speakers about the Constitution to meetings. They book-swapped and debated with friends. They created specialized reading groups whose sole purpose was to study the works that the Founding Fathers had used when they created the Constitution over 200 years ago.

Without knowing it, the people were following David McCullough’s 2005 outline for increasing good citizenship. “You can’t understand the 18th century . . . unless you understand the vocabulary of the 18th century.” McCullough writes, “Those weren’t just words. They were quoting scripture of a kind, a kind of secular creed if you will. And you can’t understand why they behaved as they did if you don’t understand that.”<sup>5</sup>

As cart-horse citizens began to understand the Constitution, they realized that their understanding created a call to action. Their actions came in many forms: tea parties, town assemblies, political candidacy, and ballot measures. This group of hard-working Americans put their tenacious skills to work in ways beyond merely voting.

Using his firebrand style, Beck has helped the once ignored majority to see that their voices are necessary to the cause of a democratic republic. After all, the Constitutional Convention was not a quiet affair. Its delegates used strong words, delivered lengthy diatribes and orations, took time to compromise and reach eventual consensus.

The point is to get together and do something to improve situations instead of just complaining while allowing others to push their own agendas unchallenged. True, the cart-horse citizens may not have the polish of a George Washington. They are more akin to the Sons of Liberty from Boston—a rag-tag, fearless band of citizens whose only wish is stop usurpations.

Beck may not achieve anything close to the historic stature of leaders like Abraham Lincoln and Winston Churchill, but if tomorrow were his last day, he could be proud of having been the Samuel Adams for this generation of cart-horse citizens. ☞

## NOTES

1. David McCullough, “Knowing History and Knowing Who We Are,” *Imprimis* 34, no. 4 (April 2005).
2. James Wood, “Tocqueville in America,” *The New Yorker*, 17 May 2010, 104–109.
3. David McCullough, “Knowing History.”
4. John F. Kennedy, “JFK on Our Nation’s Memory,” *American Heritage Magazine* 59, no. 4 (Winter 2010).
5. David McCullough, “Knowing History.”