



the opinion of **Ron Newton**

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No Jerks On The Job (PenlandScott Publishers)

Rediscovering "The Key of Liberty" And The Hand That Turns It

It is a crucial time in American history. Deep political and philosophical differences divide the fabric of American society, threatening the stability of the nation. The federal government is increasingly pitted against its own member states. The foundational rights of individual freedom progressively become subordinate to unclear, untested federal regulation. And the financial system upon which commerce is reliant reveals itself as flawed, bereft of moral strength.

At the root of the crisis is a dispute over the Founders' intent for our federal Constitution and the scope of its government. But it is not 2010 I'm talking about; it is 1798. And the common sense belief of one Massachusetts patriot then can teach us a great deal about how to navigate a similar crisis now.

William Manning (1747–1814) was a semiliterate farmer who wrote in his 1798 treatise *The Key of Liberty* that “when the war began between Brittan & Amarica I was in the prime of Life & highly taken up with Liberty & a free Government. I See almost the first blood that was shed in Concord fite & scores of men dead, dying & wounded in the Cause of Libberty, which caused serious sencations in my mind.”

Difficult as it is to read, did you grasp Manning's pedigree? He was a patriot from the beginning, fighting at Concord, emotionally affected by blood on the battlefield. He purchased the American concept of liberty at the risk of his life. He is the embodiment of the Revolutionary citizen-soldier we revere.

Yet by 1798, with our government barely 10 years old, Manning was greatly disturbed by what his sacrifice had wrought, and he wasn't alone. Deep divisions had surfaced between the literate powerful Few [Manning's term] in whose hands the initial destiny of our government lay and the Many [also Manning's term] citizens like Manning who struggled to overcome severe economic and educational disadvantages. The greatest fear of the Many was that the Few were intent on forming an elite society—aristocracy—supported by a constitutionalized federalist government that eschewed democratic republican principles. Abetting the conspiracy was a devious financial establishment. Manning described it as those who “swindle honest individuals out of their property” and “by their bribery & corruption have grate influence in our elections, & agitate our publik Counsels.” In effect, he felt the common folk were being cut out of the freedom deal.

This sentiment has a modern ring: the voices of the Tea Party movement and the independent non-party voters. They may not fear the formation of an American ruling class, but they are united in their current distrust of a government they view as elitist, unapproachable, and whose abuse of the Constitution disenfranchises the Many.

To the cause of Tea Party-types and independents—modern and old—Manning provides valuable ammunition. In his 20,000-plus word treatise, Manning advocated several courses of action—keys—to stem the encroachment of the Few on the Many. Chief among them according to historian Page Smith was “the organization of the Many into societies for the advancement of their own best interest.”

Today's Tea Partiers have done that. Like Manning advocated, they've stepped out and formed their own organizations to combat the overreach of federalism.

But as to how our current schism—one like his—could end, Manning believed there was one solution, one key to liberty. According to historian Smith, Manning felt that “no matter how cleverly a government was constructed, it could not protect the powerless from the powerful. Only they could protect themselves.”

Manning's key to liberty? Don't trust the government to act in your best interest.

So where does that leave President Obama, who frequently takes aim at the rhetoric of those who disparage big government, calling such views “inherently bad?” It leaves him in disagreement with Manning and his Many.

William Manning would add that the key to regaining the freedom intended by our Constitution is to elect public officials who understand that the best government is limited government. In the election of 1800 that's exactly what happened. America temporarily reversed her course. John Adams, the federalist, lost the presidency to Thomas Jefferson, a democratic republican who championed the limited role of government. Doubtless Manning breathed a sigh of relief.

Sadly, Manning lived to see Jefferson's political victory dashed, snuffed by what we now recognize as entrenched federal bureaucracy. President Adams' eleventh hour appointment of federalist John C. Marshall as Chief Justice of the United States Supreme Court resulted in three decades of rulings through which the federal government's power over the Many was fortified. And even though federalism as a political movement effectively died with Adams' defeat, successive presidents, including Jefferson, found the temptation to expand the power of their office irresistible.

So if the opinion of the Common Men of Manning's time—a significant majority of voters, according to some estimates—could not halt bull elephant federalism in its infancy, what chance do today's Tea Partiers and their confederates have in slowing, much less reducing, the federal behemoth that mistakenly thinks it knows how to best act in the interest of the Many?

The answer lies in something that Manning never achieved, something that serves as the hand that turns the key of liberty. It is publication and the press, the great facilitators of opinion. Today, those who fight against federalism have a voice that Manning failed to find.

Manning's attempt to publish his opinions failed. Federalist opposition to Manning's Democratic-Republican principles—enforced through the unjust powers of the ill-conceived Alien and Sedition Acts of 1798—was strong at the time. No publisher dared speak against the Adams administration for fear of imprisonment by the federal government. Thus Manning wrote that “unless some speedy and cheaper method is adopted to convey knowledge than by the present mode of newspapers, we shall not enjoy the liberty of the press long . . .” The result would be that “the common farmers and laborers that are the most interested in the measures of the time” would continue to live in ignorance, right where the Few wanted them.

Not to worry about that ever again. Now speedier, cheaper, and more open methods of Internet-based communication and content sharing offer the ability to circumvent the power of traditional publishers. (What Manning would have given for the iMac and the Internet.) Because of electronic publishing, a new coalition of Manning-like citizens hold

both the key to liberty and the method to turn it. They can publish alternative ideas at the stroke of a computer key. As a result, they are capable of providing a powerful voice to a populist patriot movement that was started and then squashed at the turn of the 18th century.

Equally true is that the proponents of extended federalism possess the same communication tools, supported by the presidential bully pulpit. They are busily at work attempting to influence you, as Manning put it, “to reverence and worship great men in office and to take for truth whatever they say with examining or trying to see for themselves.” They want you to stop referring to the government as some “menacing threatening” entity. President Obama said as much in a series of college commencement addresses this spring. “Government is us,” he said. And we can’t criticize ourselves, can we?

So with both sides equally engaged in a battle for public opinion before November’s elections, the deciding factor will be resolve. Which side wants it the most? Will a new formidable coalition of Tea Partiers, independents, conservatives, and libertarians overcome federalist resistance to turning the key of liberty? Early indicators say yes, but there is significant corrosion on the lock of federalism; it won’t turn easily, perhaps not without breaking the key, as the Alien and Sedition Acts attempted to do. No doubt the hand that reaches to turn the key will be slapped many times.

To those who consider themselves resolved to stop Obama’s federalist freight train, you need to ask yourself at what cost. You are not the first to try to reverse the course of federalism. William Manning went before you, and he died like Abraham, never seeing the culmination of all he felt was promised him, but still believing *in* the Promise.

Harvard University historian Samuel Eliot Morison summarized Manning’s determination in the forward to the 1922 publication of Manning’s “The Key of Libberty.” (It took 124 years before Manning’s misspelled treatise saw light.) Morison wrote, “It used to be said of him by his friends that if William Manning were drowned, they would seek his body up-stream, for he would surely not float down with the current like other people!” No less dedication than Manning’s is required if the Tea Party coalition is to succeed.

How is your resolve? Manning-like? If so, then your hand will help turn the key of liberty.

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