

RIGHTS versus RESPONSIBILITIES

“The liberty of one depends not so much on the removal of all restraint from him, as on the due restraint upon the liberty of others. Without such restraint, there can be no liberty – liberty so far from being endangered or destroyed by this, that it is extended and secured.”

Fisher Ames, Massachusetts Constitution Convention, 1788, quoted here from DEBATE ON THE CONSTITUTION (New York: Literary Classics of the United States, 1993), page 893

One of the greatest hurdles for the fledging country to ratify the Constitution was that there was no guarantee of personal and civil rights. Only through faith that their leaders would immediately draft a bill of rights did the People agree to the Constitution.

Thomas Jefferson, who was the U.S. Ambassador to France while the Bill of Rights was being created, greatly criticized the Bill of Rights because it did not include our responsibilities towards those rights. He predicted we would become a nation obsessed with our rights and heedless of our duties.

Throughout the years several organizations have drawn up and promoted what they have called a “Bill of Responsibilities” to help define, as Jefferson and Lafayette did with the French Bill of Rights of Man, those duties which are inheritable necessary for us to fully enjoy the accompanying rights.

Here are some samples of what the Bill of Rights could contain were it rewritten as a Bill of Responsibilities:

ARTICLE 1: The People shall uphold their responsibility of respecting other people’s religion and their free exercise thereof; and all Peoples shall retain a free exercise of their religion as long as it does not infringe upon others’ religious exercise. All People shall have free exercise of speech and the press as long as they are responsible for all effects of said expression, whether good or ill; they shall ensure their assemblies are peaceful and do

not disturb the general order of the community; and they shall be responsible enough to petition the Government for legitimate redresses of grievances for offenses the government is authorized to prevent but failed to do so.

ARTICLE 2 - A well regulated Militia, being necessary to the security of a free State, shall be supported and promoted by all Citizens. The proper use, function, and purpose of the People keeping and bearing Arms shall be actively promoted.

ARTICLE 9 - The enumeration in the Constitution, of certain rights, shall not be construed to deny or disparage others retained by the people, who must be vigilant in retaining these rights within the proper level of government administration.

ARTICLE 10 - The powers not delegated to the United States by the Constitution, nor prohibited by it to the States, are reserved to the States respectively, or to the People, who will exercise those rights in a way that is agreeable to the meaning and the spirit of this Constitution.

In addition to this, a bill of responsibility could include the duties of the People in participating in the election process, in the protection of the voting right and responsibility, and in regularly communicating with their elected representatives. It might even include their duty in teaching their families concerning the workings of their government and their duties to their country and fellow citizens.