

To Your Tents, O Israel

by David Kopel

When the Founding Fathers debated how best to defend against tyranny, it wasn't just England that was weighing on their minds.

Is a nation more secure with a standing army than with a militia? Is a strong central government better than a loose confederation? Is violent resistance to tyranny morally justifiable? What respect should be paid to the people's right to keep and bear arms?

When the founders of the American republic grappled with these questions, one of their most important sources of wisdom was the Old Testament's history of the nation of Israel. In our times, when Bible literacy (especially knowledge of the historical books of the Old Testament) is much more limited than it was in the 18th century, there are still important lessons to be learned from the Bible's accounts of an ancient people. These lessons — in the dynamics of military action and the complexities of political process — transcend both the age of the Bible narratives and the question of their literal truth.

Judges and Weapons Control

According to the Old Testament's central narrative, the twelve tribes of Israel escaped from slavery in Egypt and conquered most of the Promised Land of Canaan, after which they continued to associate themselves in a loose confederation. They defended themselves with a militia rather than a professional army. The book of Judges details a history of several hundred years in which the tribes often had to fight to resist or throw off foreign domination.

Soon after the Israelites began their invasion of Canaan by crossing the Jordan River from the east, Canaan came under assault from the west as well. The seafaring Philistines, who may have been a Greek-speaking people, had failed in an attempt to conquer Egypt. So they set their sights on Canaan.

Technologically superior to the Israelites, the Philistines were outstanding smiths who equipped their soldiers with high-quality iron weapons. They established secure control over the territory of Gaza.

By the beginning of the history related in the first book of Samuel, the Philistines had captured extensive territories from the disunited Israelite tribes. After conquering Judah (the largest tribe), which controlled the southern part of modern-day Israel, they imposed one of the first weapons-control laws in recorded history: "Now there was no smith found throughout the land of Israel: for the Philistines said, Lest the Hebrews make them swords or spears . . ." (1 Samuel 13:19. I quote from the King James Version, the most influential translation in 18th-century America, and today.) Even to sharpen a plow, the Israelites had to pay a Philistine ironsmith (1 Samuel 13:20–21).

Because of the iron-control laws, the Israelites had few good weapons to use against the Philistines, although a future leader named Saul and his son Jonathan apparently possessed some of their own: "So it came to pass on the day of battle, that there was neither sword nor spear found in the hand of any of the people that were with Saul and Jonathan: but with Saul and with Jonathan his son was there found" (1 Samuel 13:22).

As this passage shows, governments intending to prevent subjects from possessing arms must do more than outlaw arms; they must also find a way to prevent people from making their own. The Philistine ban on ironsmithing appears to have been largely effective in accomplishing its goal. Similarly,

In the reign of King David, there were strict laws about children and weapons: children had to learn to use them well.

during the Tokugawa period in Japan, starting in the 17th century, the government imposed very restrictive controls on the small number of gunsmiths in the nation, thereby ensuring the almost total prohibition of firearms.

In the United States, the prohibition group known as the Brady Campaign (formerly Handgun Control, Inc., and before that the National Council to Control Handguns) has proposed similar legislation. In 1994, the group began promoting the “Brady II” bill to control firearms parts and repair. Anyone owning an “arsenal” of 20 or more guns would be subject to three unannounced government inspections of his home every year. For purposes of establishing the existence of an “arsenal,” all firearms, some spare parts of firearms, and all ammunition magazines would count as a “firearm.” Thus, a person with four real guns, plus a normal-sized collection of spare parts and magazines, would be considered the proprietor of an “arsenal.”

If Brady II became law, ordinary gun-owners would be encouraged to eliminate their supplies of spare parts, so as not to be subject to the special searches imposed on “arsenal” owners. As spare parts collections were diminished, practical knowledge of elementary gunsmithing (such as how to replace a worn-out barrel) would likewise diminish.

In countries such as the Philippines and Afghanistan that have long traditions of cottage gunsmithing, dictatorships have found it hard to disarm the populace. The Ferdinand Marcos dictatorship in the Philippines tried and failed to prohibit civilian gun ownership. The Taliban dictatorship in Afghanistan likewise outlawed gun ownership for everyone except Taliban supporters, yet did not succeed in disarming the country.

But let us return to the methods of political control that Israel itself possessed. Unifying leadership was provided by charismatic leaders, “judges,” who told the Israelites what God wanted them to do. To speak in secular terms, these figures seem to have been selected for leadership by the consensus of the community, in recognition of their personal qualities. Samson was a judge. Deborah was a judge (the office was not restricted to males). Judges rendered legal decisions; they also led military resistance to foreign conquerors.

The last man to rule Israel as a judge was Samuel. Although the position was not hereditary, Samuel attempted to arrange for his sons to succeed him, even though they were notoriously corrupt and dishonest (1 Samuel 8:1–3). That was a failure. Samuel also seems to have failed as a military leader. The

Philistines defeated Israel at the battle of Ebenezer, captured the Ark of the Covenant, and destroyed God’s sanctuary at Shiloh (1 Samuel 4:1–11; Psalm 78:60–64; Jeremiah 7:12).

Understandably, the Israelites tired of the system of judges. They asked Samuel to ask God to appoint a king to rule over them (1 Samuel 8:6). Samuel replied by delivering a warning from God about the dangers of abusive government. One of the dangers was a standing army; another was conscription:

He will take your sons and appoint them for himself, for his chariots, and to be his horsemen; some shall run before his chariots. And he will appoint him captains over thousands, and captains over fifties; and will set them to ear [plow] his ground, and to reap his harvest, and to make his instruments of war, and instruments of his chariots. (1 Samuel 8:11–12)

In other words, military conscription for a standing army would lead to labor conscription, with Israelites forced to work for the king and his military.

Further, the prediction that the king would have chariots meant that as a monarchy Israel would abandon its policy of not developing a cavalry. The confederated Israel described in Judges did not use cavalry. Cavalry was expensive. It was better suited to wide-ranging wars of imperial conquest than to defending the hill country that was the core of Israelite settlement. Moreover, a cavalry force might — as in the case of imperial Rome, or the knights of the Middle Ages — turn itself into a social overclass, destroying an egalitarian militia system and enforcing a new system of political dominance.

Samuel issued more prophetic warnings. Besides the conscription of men, there would be conscription of women, and there would be taxes and confiscations. Women would be forced to serve as the king’s cooks and bakers. The king would “take your fields, and your vineyards, and your oliveyards, even the best of them, and give them to his servants.” He would take a tenth of the people’s earnings, a tenth of the young men and servants, and a tenth of the sheep. “And ye shall be his servants. And ye shall cry out in that day because of your king which ye shall have chosen” (1 Samuel 8:13–18). Subsequent Bible history is full of examples of the truth of this

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prophecy. For example, wicked Queen Jezebel ordered that a farmer named Naboth be killed so that she and her husband could take his vineyard (1 Kings 21).

“Nevertheless the people refused to obey the voice of Samuel and they said, Nay; but we will have a king over us; that we also may be like other nations; and that our king may judge us, and go out before us, and fight our battles” (1 Samuel 8:19–20). So Samuel chose Saul as the first King of Israel, and the people ratified that choice.

Centuries later, political theorists were still debating the implications of the way in which Saul became king. In the famous book of 1644, "Lex Rex," which justified Scottish Presbyterian resistance to the English king, Samuel Rutherford examined Saul's ascension to the throne, using it to argue that all lawful monarchies were founded on a consensual covenant between the king and the people. If the king violated the covenant, the people could remove him (by force, if necessary) and choose a new government. The king was the people's delegate for enforcement of the law, but the people always retained the sovereignty. Such ideas about the nature of human government are an important link between biblical narrative and the English and American tradition of resistance to arbitrary political authority.

The Israelites had needed a strong, unified government to shake off Philistine rule. But just as Samuel had foretold, within a few generations their government became so strong that it took away the liberties and property of the Israelites themselves.

King Saul

Saul was at first a successful and popular king. He mobilized the Israelites and led them on a series of campaigns against the Amorites and the Ammonites. Although militia comprised the bulk of the Israelite forces, Saul created the first Israelite standing army — a cadre of about 3,000 full-time professional soldiers. Unlike militia, the soldiers in the standing army did not return to farming, trade, or other civilian occupations when a campaign was over.

But when they fought the Philistines at the battle of Michmash, the Israelites were once again greatly outnumbered. Saul's eldest son Jonathan and his shield bearer left the main force, sneaked up on a Philistine garrison, and caused it to panic and flee. As the panicked soldiers rushed toward a larger Philistine camp, they were mistaken for charging Israelites; Saul took advantage of their terror and confusion to rout them. Surprise and audacity carried the day — as they would again in Israel's 20th-century wars.

Later, 1 Samuel reports, Saul's young soldier David defeated the Philistine giant Goliath in single combat. Regardless of whether the story was literally true, it became a symbol of a small, resourceful nation — skilled in arms and trusting in God — that defeated much larger, more arrogant foes. It became a symbol for America in its war against the world's strongest power, Great Britain.

But the incident also illustrated the instability of a political regime deriving its legitimacy from military leadership. As was the custom whenever an enemy army was defeated, "the women came out of all the cities of Israel, singing and dancing, to meet king Saul." But the women sang, "Saul hath slain his thousands, and David his *ten* thousands" (1 Samuel 18:6-7; emphasis added). Saul became worried that David's sudden military fame would allow him to make a bid for the kingship. Indeed, unbeknownst to Saul, Samuel had already secretly anointed David as king (1 Samuel 16:12-13). Religion still played an important role in the state. Military success was important, but it was not the only thing that mattered.

After Samuel turned against Saul, Saul's fortunes declined. Abandoned by David and his followers, and, according to the Bible narrative, abandoned also by God, Saul was defeated at the Battle of Mount Gilboa, overwhelmed by Philistine chari-

ots and archers (1 Samuel 31). Rather than be captured by the Philistines, Saul fell on his own sword. David assumed leadership of the Israelite military effort.

King David

During a long reign, David led Israel on enormously successful campaigns. He established direct rule in all the traditional territories of the twelve tribes — encompassing the 1948

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borders of Israel, as well as the West Bank territories of Judaea and Samaria. He also conquered Damascus, and through vassal states established Israelite hegemony all the way to the northern tributaries of the Euphrates.

While the Israelites remained primarily an infantry force, King David encouraged the tribes to develop various specialties. The tribe of Naphtali were spearmen (1 Chronicles 12:34). The tribe of Issachar became expert in military intelligence (1 Chronicles 12:32). The Benjamites were already adept with slings, and became experts with bows and arrows (Judges 20:15-16; 1 Chronicles 12:2).

There were strict laws about children and weapons: children had to learn to use them well. Military training was universal and began early. As Mordechai Gichon and former Israeli President Chaim Herzog write in "Battles of the Bible," "The tribal chiefs continued to train the young in the use of arms special to their clan, as well as in the maintenance of personal weapons." King David mandated that Judaeans children be taught archery (2 Samuel 1:18).

The bulk of Israel's military was still the militia, including an active force for which each tribe contributed men to serve one month out of twelve. Settlements in border or contested regions were especially dependent on a home guard.

King David ordered a census, which the Bible describes as sinful. The Israelites probably feared a census as the first step towards centralized taxation and conscription into a standing army (2 Samuel 24; 1 Chronicles 21:1). Similar fears have been raised about censuses in other nations, and legitimately so. During World War I, for example, records from the 1910 U.S. census were used to track down young American men who had not registered for the draft.

King David continued to strengthen the standing army. The military elite was built around two groups of 30 men each. Herzog and Gichon explain that these groups of 30 gave the Israelite army a strong foundation in unorthodox warfare against larger and technologically superior foes. Similarly, the modern Israeli Defense Forces were built on the foundation of the Hagganah, which led the guerilla resistance to British occupation in the 1940s. The IDF continues to excel in unorthodox and daring tactics against numerically superior foes.

The capture of Jerusalem was an especially important strategic success for David. Recognizing that its terrain provided a very secure defensive position, he moved his capital there. The city, which had not historically belonged to any tribe, was a sign of national unity. But although David greatly centralized government power, the militia system remained intact. National consent was still required for most offensive wars (an exception was made for wars involving the eight nations or tribal groups that scripture regarded as permanent enemies).

King Solomon — and the Crackup

David was succeeded by his son Solomon, under whose reign Israel achieved its greatest territorial and economic power. Solomon built a series of frontier fortifications, useful for offense as well as defense. He also built the first significant Israeli mobile force, composed of war chariots (1 Kings 10:26–29). And he became fabulously rich. Some of his military equipment was, like his throne and his drinking cups, literally made of gold: “And king Solomon made two hundred targets of beaten gold; six hundred shekels of gold went to one target. And he made three hundred shields of beaten gold” (1 Kings 10:16–18). It is likely that this equipment was more useful for ostentation than for war.

Although Solomon used his power to collect tribute from various vassal states, big government proved very burdensome to the Israelites. Empires and standing armies are expensive. Productive men were removed from the economy to serve in the armed forces and civil service, and other men had to be taxed to support them. The creation of an expensive corps of war chariots exacerbated the problem.

Significantly, the cabinets of King David and King Solomon each came to include a minister in charge of forced labor (2 Samuel 20:4, 23–26; 1 Kings 4:1–6), an office that was not present in David’s original cabinet (2 Samuel 8:16–18). Some of the forced laborers may have been foreign captives from the imperial wars. One passage claims that non-Jews in Israel were conscripted into forced labor (1 Kings 9:20–22). Other passages suggest that the Israelites themselves were conscripted into Solomon’s building projects (1 Kings 5:13, 11:28, 12:10–11).

As Samuel had warned, a large share of Israel’s labor was being consumed by the monarchy. The heavy cost of government stretched the limits of Israel’s ability to pay. The need for

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revenue led to an expansionist and imperialist policy, as Israel sought tribute from other nations to maintain its high-priced government. The cost of maintaining the empire then became an additional financial burden.

Far from being a recipe for security, Solomon’s centralized and militarized big government was the recipe for revolution. The event waited only for the appearance of a very bad politician, Solomon’s son and successor Rehoboam.

The people petitioned Rehoboam for tax relief. His older advisors suggested that he lie to the public, but he followed the advice of his younger ones: “And the king answered the people

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roughly . . . saying, My father made your yoke heavy, and I will add to your yoke: my father also chastised you with whips, but I will chastise you with scorpions.” (1 Kings 12:13–14).

Incited by the prophet Ahijah (the spiritual and ideological entanglements of politics never went away), the ten northern tribes of Israel revolted and created an independent state of Israel. Their king was Jeroboam, who had previously failed in a revolt against King Solomon. The rallying cry of the rebellion was, “To your tents, O Israel” (1 Kings 12:16). It was the cry of a society that still recalled the time when government was small and localities were the foundation of political society. The rebels remembered the days before a centralizing government consolidated religious power by building the temple at Jerusalem. They remembered the days before the government, allied with a priestly hierarchy dedicated to religious uniformity, attempted to consolidate its economic power with high taxes and its military power with a standing army. They remembered the days when the Israelites said that their only king was God.

The divided kingdoms (Israel in the north, Judah in the south) won some wars in subsequent years, especially when they were allied with each other. But they usually failed to make an alliance. There were many domestic problems as well, especially those centering on their rival religious establishments. The policy of imperialism meant that Jewish royal families frequently took foreign wives (such as Jezebel) to cement alliances; the foreign wives and their local allies often supported nature religions (which included human sacrifice) in competition with Judaism.

It is interesting, however, that although the religious conflicts within Israel and Judah were of the highest magnitude, involving, according to their partisans, a literal struggle for the nation’s soul, there are no records of any faction, while in the ascendancy, ever attempting to disarm an opposing faction. Perhaps the memory of weapons prohibition under Philistine rule was just too strong.

Keeping arms in the hands of the people did help prevent government from sliding into absolute despotism. Checks and balances were often provided, especially in the northern kingdom, by people who knew how to use weapons to displace

unruly kings. Religion acted as another check, especially when prophets arose to rebuke the king and his court.

So Israel under the monarchy always had an armed population (as the 2nd Amendment envisions for the United States). It also had powerful dissidents, the prophets, who were not afraid to use their freedom of speech to rebuke the government (as the 1st Amendment provides). Yet even though ancient Israel might be said to have protected both 1st Amendment and 2nd Amendment rights, these were not sufficient to protect the full scope of liberty and prevent serious abuses by government. The concentration of national political power continued to have terrible consequences.

Today, some people naively claim that as long as their favorite right (free speech, for instance, or the right to arms) is protected, American liberty will always be secure. The experience of ancient Israel shows the folly of such claims. The 1st and 2nd Amendments make great contributions to safeguarding freedom, but they are not strong enough by themselves to shoulder the whole burden of protecting liberty from a government that consolidates too much political and economic power.

Israelite Americans

The first two generations of New Englanders saw themselves as Israel in the Wilderness (the 40-year period when the tribes wandered around the Sinai Peninsula, before entering the Promised Land). Around 1690, as increased population and the growth of towns made the Wilderness parallel untenable, the new ideology emphasized "Israel's constitution." The model of good government was Israel's unwritten constitution, which required that society be run according to published laws and

fair and orderly procedures. New England's laws and customs should ensure that power could not be abused, as some kings of the Hebrews had abused their power, and should especially ensure that government would not suppress religion, as some Israelite monarchs had attempted to suppress or weaken the worship of Yahweh, while promoting nature religions.

Still later, as New England sought to convince the other colonies to revolt against George III, the dominant story of Israel became the story of what historian Harry Stout calls "the Jewish Republic." Israel had governed itself during the period of the judges, but had sinned against God by becoming a monarchy. America needed to throw off the monarchy and return to the only system of government that God approved: self-government.

To cite one example: Harvard College President Samuel Langdon's 1775 election sermon was built on Isaiah 1:26: "And I will restore thy judges as at the first, and thy counsellors as at the beginning; afterward thou shalt be called the city of Righteousness, the faithful city." Important sermons had a much broader audience than just the people who were in attendance when the minister spoke. Sermons were often reprinted and distributed throughout the colonies. By 1776, New England Congregationalist ministers were preaching at a record pace, over 2,000 sermons a week, and the number of Congregationalist pamphlets from New England exceeded the number of secular pamphlets from all the other colonies, combined, by a ratio of more than four to one.

Peter Whitney, in a 1776 sermon titled "American Independence Vindicated," summed up the attitudes of the New England Congregationalist ministers. He argued that

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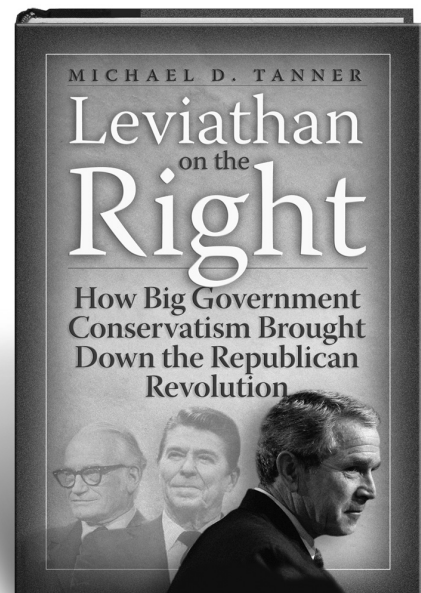
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the 13 “tribes” of Americans had been patient in their suffering under oppression, like the ten tribes of Israel under King Rehoboam, until they had no choice but to revolt. The form of government of an independent United States was uncertain, but the model should be premonarchic republican Israel.

Back in 1765, Stephen Johnson’s sermon in Newport, Rhode Island, had pointed to Israel throwing off Rehoboam as analogous to Holland’s throwing off the Spanish yoke in the late 16th and early 17th centuries, and he suggested that both rebellions

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provided good examples for Americans. In 1780, during the war of independence, Simeon Howard preached a sermon to the Massachusetts legislators, reminding them that “the Jews always exercised this right of choosing their own rulers.”

Even the deist Thomas Paine took up the theme in “Common Sense,” arguing that monarchy was inherently sinful, because the Israelites had rejected God when they asked for a king. Monarchs usurped prerogatives that belonged solely to God. A person could believe in the Bible or in kings, but not in both: “These portions of scripture are direct and positive. They admit of no equivocation. That the Almighty hath here entered his protest against monarchical government, is true, or the scripture is false.”

Although the details changed with time, the intensity of New England’s self-identification with Israel did not. In April 1776, when George Washington had just forced the British out of Boston, Samuel Cooper took the pulpit at the newly liberated First Church of Boston for a sermon that the congregation knew would be of great historical importance. Cooper explained that there was a “very striking Resemblance between the Condition of our Country from the beginning and that of antient Israel, so many Passages in holy writ referring to their particular Circumstances as a People, may with peculiar Propriety be adopted by us.” Like the Israelites, the Americans were given their land by God, and would always possess it, as long as they stayed faithful to God.

In the famous 1780 “A Sermon on the Day of the Commencement of the Constitution,” Cooper returned to the theme, pointing to “a striking resemblance between our own circumstances and those of the ancient Israelites.” If Americans were virtuous, then they would build the New Jerusalem that is promised in the penultimate chapter of the last book of the New Testament: “Thus will our country resemble the new city which St. John saw ‘coming down from God out of heaven, adorned as a bride for her husband.’”

Good Americans, like good Jews, needed to be ready to fight. Ministers warned of the ancient Israelite city of Laish, which was destroyed because it neglected to prepare defensively (Judges 18:27–28). “Curse ye Meroz,” thundered the

ministers, recalling the curse of Judge Deborah against a city that failed to arm itself and sat on the sidelines during her war of national liberation against a foreign king.

And good Americans, like good Jews, needed to be ready to overthrow tyrannical rulers. In the early 1770s, the most-read sermon was “An Oration Upon the Beauties of Liberty,” delivered in 1772 by the Baptist John Allen, who cited the Israelite revolution against Rehoboam as justification for American resistance to England. He warned:

[T]he Americans will not submit to be SLAVES, they know the use of the gun, and the military art . . . and where his Majesty has one soldier, who art in general the refuse of the earth, America can produce fifty, free men, and all volunteers, and raise a more potent army of men in three weeks, than England can in three years.

The problem was — and remains — the challenge of maintaining a society that is strong enough to resist foreign enemies, yet whose government does not infringe domestic freedom. It is one thing to justify a revolution; it is another thing to maintain a system of limited government.

The writers of the Constitution knew how Israel changed from a decentralized militia society with a small government into a centralized, expensive monarchy with a large standing army. The story of Israel was consistent with what they had learned about England, France, Rome, and other great powers: centralism, monarchy, and standing armies created a vicious cycle of excessive growth and expensive government.

Yet as the founders also recognized, a decentralized, low-tax, militia-reliant society was difficult to sustain. During the era of the judges, the Hebrews had found the problem insurmountable: in times of peril, some tribes would sit out the conflict, leaving the fighting to others. Tribes might battle one another rather than working together against external dangers. So the Constitution tried to balance the centralization necessary to national defense with the decentralization necessary to liberty.

Has it worked? Any answer is likely to be as complicated as the problems to which the Constitution, like the biblical history of Israel, responded. □

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