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MAGNA CARTA - Your Rights, Your Legacy  
800<sup>th</sup> Anniversary – Why Should We Remember?

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“We will not sell, or deny, or delay right or justice to anyone.” These thirteen words demand ethics reform in Congress and our State legislatures. They echo in the indictments brought for corruption in campaign finance. They are fighting words!

Yet, they were written in 1215, 800 years ago, in *Magna Carta*. The liberties that *Magna Carta* declared are embedded in the American Constitution’s Bill of Rights.

Too few of us remember this document. Its saga, like the fictional Star Wars story, comes from “A long time ago, in a galaxy far, far away....It is a period of civil war.” Life eight centuries ago in medieval England seems like another galaxy. The Middle Ages lacked electricity, printing, cell phones, processed food, health care, and yet human beings coped. Let’s remember.

A dictator, King John, whose armed forces enforced his every will, then ruled England. He imprisoned when he wished, married off the widows of his knights to gain their property and consolidate power, seized farms and woods, confiscated property when he wanted, and waged war.

King John’s conduct alienated his subjects, one-half of whom were free men, and divided the loyalties of the barons and the church. It is hardly surprising that civil war ensued. What is wondrous is that the barons and clergy settled the war not by arms, but by parchment and pens.

Agreement on *Magna Carta* was about restoring justice and enabling peace. The warring factions met on neutral ground, a marshy meadow called Runnymede in the Thames River floodplain, little suited for battle. There the barons extracted from King John 63 written promises, including the thirteen words of article 40 recalled above. In June of 1215 the King confirmed these “ancient” liberties of all the English people, and promised to obey the “law of the land.”

But treachery stalked England then. By August, John had renounced this Charter of Liberties. Warfare raged on. In October, King John died of illness, leaving his nine-year old son to succeed him on the throne as Henry III.

Henry’s coronation shifted the balance of power to the barons. The Earl of Pembroke, Robert Marshal, as Regent for the King, proclaimed two royal charters, a *Forest Charter* of 17 articles, and again the longer, or “Magna” meaning “Great,” Charter of Liberties with 47 articles. The

first protected the livelihoods of all who depended on forests and farmland. The second secured the civil and political rights of all, such as trial by jury, no taxation without representation, or *habeas corpus*. Eventually, we came to call this “due process of law.”

At Runnymede, the rule of law was born. Liberties mattered. Ben Franklin first published *Magna Carta* in the colonies. Colonial leaders studied William Blackstone’s *Commentaries* on “these two sacred charters.” *Magna Carta* was invoked in the lead up to the American Revolution. The legacy of *Magna Carta* led to adding the Bill of Rights to the U.S. Constitution.

Do not our liberties matter today? When courts enforce our freedom of information laws or our environmental impact assessment rules, they ensure that officials follow the law, not their whim. Women’s rights still need greater protection. When a judge arraigns someone accused of a crime, procedural justice guarantees everyone’s basic rights. When legislators insist on open deliberations and on disclosing all campaign contribution, they reaffirm rule of law.

People in many countries today lack “rule of law.” The concept may still be alien to many governments, yet the human thirst for this singular human attainment persists. Contemporary claims for human rights and due process of law exist because individuals of good will once sought to restore peace and ordered justice at Runnymede.

*Magna Carta*’s DNA marks every struggle to uphold honest governance. When today’s contentious battles about liberties are resolved and recede, tomorrow’s strivings for justice take center stage. The quest to live by the rule of law is likely to be eternal. Remembering what we humans together have achieved since 1215 emboldens us to keep approaching this receding horizon.

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