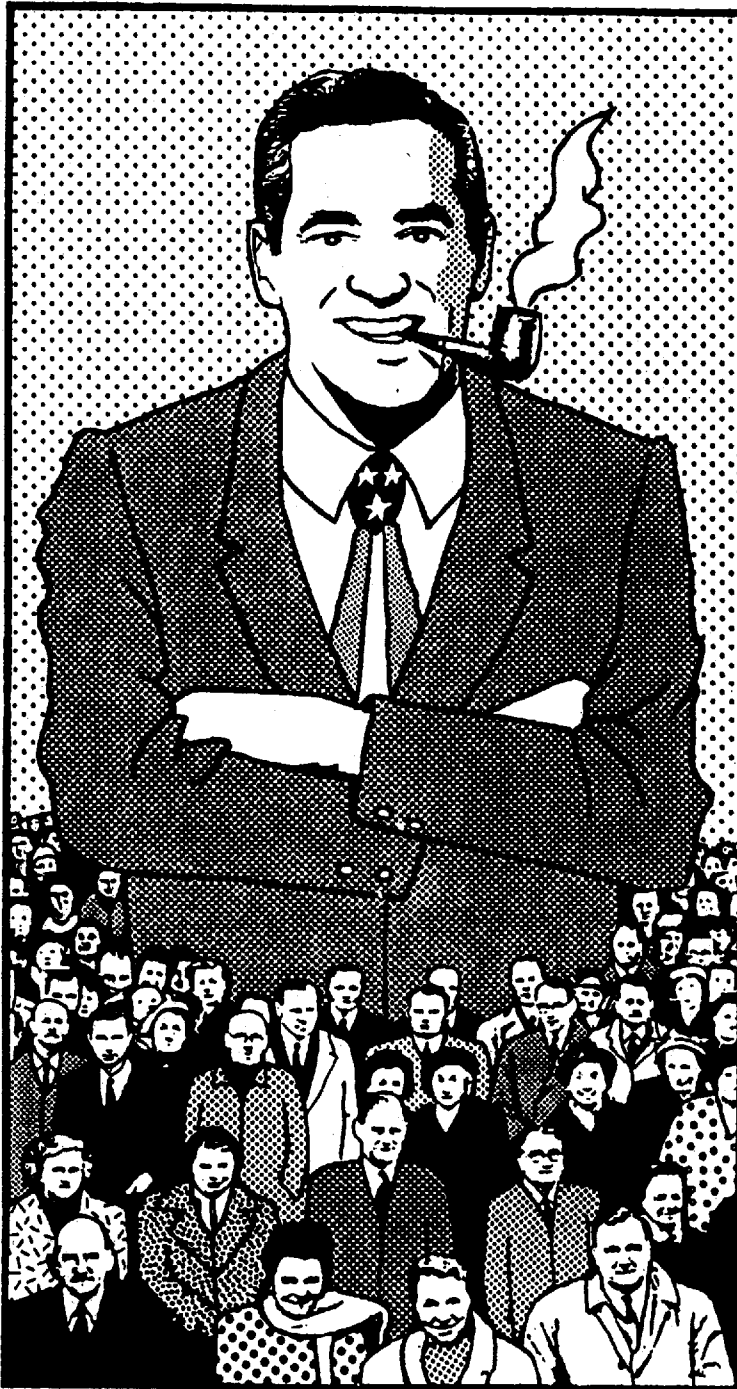


# FOUNDING FATHER KNOWS BEST

BY GORE VIDAL

ILLUSTRATIONS BY TOM TOMORROW



11. Morkkewol Wo 1



THOMAS JEFFERSON.

This is where it all begins. With his Declaration of Independence, he created the *idea* of the American Revolution, as opposed to the less glamorous and certainly less noble business of simply deciding who pays tax to whom. Along with the usual separated-colony boilerplate, there would be a new nation founded upon life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. The first two foundation stones were familiar if vague. What, after all, is liberty? Liberty *from* what? From everyone else? From decent opinion? From accountability? That debate goes on. But the notion of freedom from tyranny is an ancient one and everyone thinks he knows what Jefferson meant, including dreamy Tom himself.

The "pursuit of happiness" is the real joker in the deck. No one is quite sure just what Jefferson meant, but I suppose he had it in mind that government would leave each citizen alone to develop as best he can in a tranquil climate to achieve whatever it is that his heart desires with minimum distress to the other pursuers of happiness. This was a revolutionary concept in 1776. It still is. With a single phrase Jefferson had upped the ante and made our Republic — in name at least — more human-scale than any other.

Eventually we freed ourselves from England, thanks to the French fleet. At the end of the struggle, there was George Washington and hardly anyone else except a group of ambitious lawyers, over-excited by the prospect of a new nation with new laws and a complex judiciary in need of powerful advocates and prosecutors and interpreters. Hence a most lawyerly Constitution that, in effect, excluded from citizenship women, slaves, Native Americans and the poor. The Constitution's famous checks and balances were designed to check the man who would be king while making certain that in the balance the people at large would have no weight at all. That is why, unlike most First World countries, the United States has elections rather than politics.

The second revolutionary note was struck in 1791. Although the Founding Fathers were, to a man, natural conservatives, there were enough Jefferson-minded pur-

suers of happiness among them to realize that so lawyerly a Republic would probably serve as a straitjacket for those of an energetic nature. So to insure the right of each to pursue happiness, the Bill of Rights was attached to the Constitution. In theory, henceforward no one need fear the tyranny of either the state or the majority.

Certain of our rights, such as freedom of speech, were said to be inalienable. But a significant minority has never accepted the idea of so much freedom for so many. That is why, from 1791 to the present day, the ongoing drama of our Republic has been the relentless attack of the prosperous few upon the rights of the restless many — often masked as the righteous will of the majority against the deviant few. The current Supreme Court is clearly dedicated to the removal or alienation of as many of our inalienable rights as possible, on the specious ground that what the founders did not spell out as a "right" was not a right at all but some sort of unpatriotic, un-American activity.

The result has been confusion, to put it mildly. The Fourteenth Amendment made it clear that those freedoms guaranteed to persons as citizens of the United States also applied to them as citizens of pure Utah or sex-sickened Georgia. But, so the argument goes, if the Constitution does not say that you may smoke marijuana, then any state may forbid you to smoke what a local majority thinks is bad for you. On the other hand, if the producers of death-enhancing consumer items have enough money, they can buy congresses, courts, presidents; they can also hire a consumer spokesperson like Jesse Helms to uphold the constitutional right of those who wish to pursue happiness and profits by making and selling cigarettes, which kill a half-million or so people a year, while forbidding, at huge expense, heroin, which kills in the pathetically low four figures. That neither tobacco nor heroin is good for people is agreed by all. But should either be outlawed in the sort of society that Jefferson designed for us? Finally, do we want a free society or a patriarchal one? My question is not rhetorical.

Patriarchal. From the Latin *pater*, father. As in father knows best. A patriot, then,

is someone who serves the *fatherland*. The notion of the father as chief of chiefs is prehistoric. From this tribal conceit derives monotheism: the idea of a single god-creator who has created at least half of us in *his* image.

Although religion may be freely practiced in these parts, it was deliberately excluded from the political arrangements of our Republic. Unfortunately, the zealous few are always busy trying to make the many submit to their religious laws and superstitions. In the 1950s they won a great, and illegal, victory over the Constitution when they put the phrase "In God We Trust" on the currency.

Although the notion of one god may give comfort to those in need of a daddy, it reminds the rest of us that the totalitarian society is grounded upon the concept of God the father. One paternal god, one paternal leader. Authority is absolute. And error, as the Roman Catholic Church tells us, has no rights.

Each year it is discovered that when high school seniors are confronted blindly with the Bill of Rights, they neither like it nor approve of it. Our society has made them into true patriots, believers in a stern patriarchy where the police have every right to arrest you for just about anything that Dad disapproves of. The tragedy of the United States in this century is not the crackup of an empire, which we never knew what to do with in the first place, but the collapse of the idea of the citizen as someone autonomous whose private life is not subject to orders from above. Today, hundreds of thousands of Americans are only marginally free as they undergo mandatory blood tests, urine tests, lie detector tests. Speech is theoretically free but the true pulpit, electronic or print, is pretty much denied anyone who does not support the patriarchal state in all its misdeeds. It is no wonder that two-thirds of citizens under 40 have no interest in public affairs. They know they are not participants in the governance of the country. They are, simply, administrative units.

I would put the time and place of our fall as the White House in 1950. Harry Truman

## NOTES ON OUR PATRIARCHAL STATE

*This article is reprinted from The Nation, which last summer celebrated its 125th birthday by holding celebrations in several cities. Gore Vidal delivered a "State of the Union" address at the event in Berkeley, from which this essay is adapted. The speech is also available on cassette from Pacifica Radio Archives (800/735-0230).*

*Vidal's life as a man of letters is equaled by his political acuity and his solutions for reforming the American system. His newest book is Who Owns the U.S.? (reviewed on p. 27).  
—Richard Nilsen*

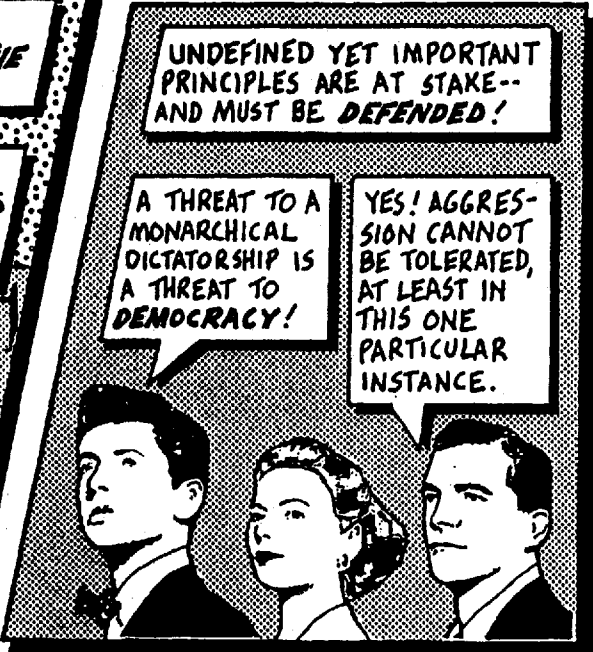
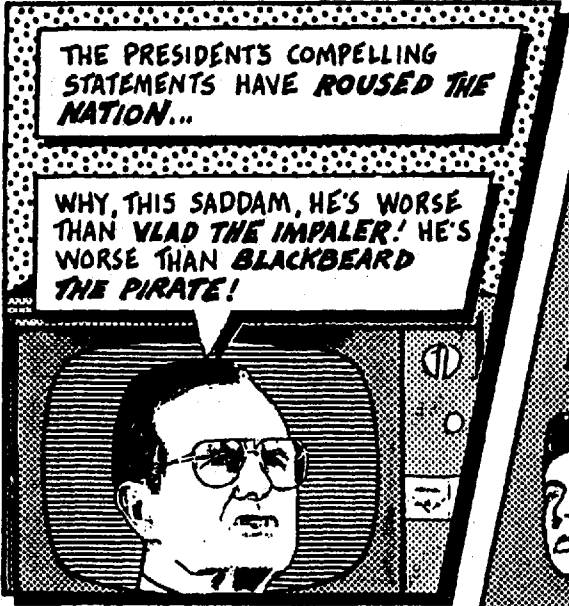
*I would put the time and place of our fall as the White House in 1950. Harry Truman and his advisers decided to keep the United States on a full wartime basis.*

and his advisers decided that it would be a good idea to keep the United States on a full wartime basis even though there was no enemy on earth who could challenge us militarily or economically. Therefore an enemy had to be invented. The dictator Stalin fit the bill. So did atheistic and godless communism as a rival religion. But, said a Republican senator to Truman, if you really want to waste all that money on the military, you're going to have to scare the hell out of the American people. With a lot of help from Congress and from the likes of Henry Luce, Truman did just that.

Out of fairness to our inadvertent totalitarians, there was an urgent economic motive in 1950. We had made our recovery from the Depression of the 1930s only when the war put everyone to work. After the war, rather than run the terrible risk of a free economy in which General Motors would have to make something people wanted, like a car, we decided to take all the revenue — two-thirds anyway — of the federal government and put it into armaments.

The second reason for our garrison state is obvious: profit. There is a third reason, but I don't think most people in 1950 were aware of its consequences. A state forever at war, hot or cold, is easily controlled by

the few, unlike a relatively free society, in which the governors are accountable to the people at large and to law. Today the neglected, ignored people have got the point; half the electorate refuses to vote in presidential elections. After all, was there any difference between Dukakis and Bush? Admittedly, Dukakis did not seem to mind too much if Kitty was raped by black prisoners on furlough, while Bush thought the flag was just grand, even if it was made in Taiwan. This was all good fun of the kind our rulers, who gave us prime-time television, think the idiots — us — will lap up. But then it is their job to divert public attention from the great corruption of the Pentagon and S&Ls and toxic waste. In the end there was a difference between the two: Dukakis wanted to increase the Pentagon budget by \$4 billion, Bush by \$11 billion. This being the extent of disagreement between the parties, it is clear that neither is an instrument by which the people might assert themselves and make known their will. As for a third party, we tried that in 1972. The People's Party. Unfortunately we hadn't realized that to have a third party you must have two other parties. We also found out that political parties, as opposed to spontaneous movements, are not possible in an oligarchy as entrenched as the one that rules us.



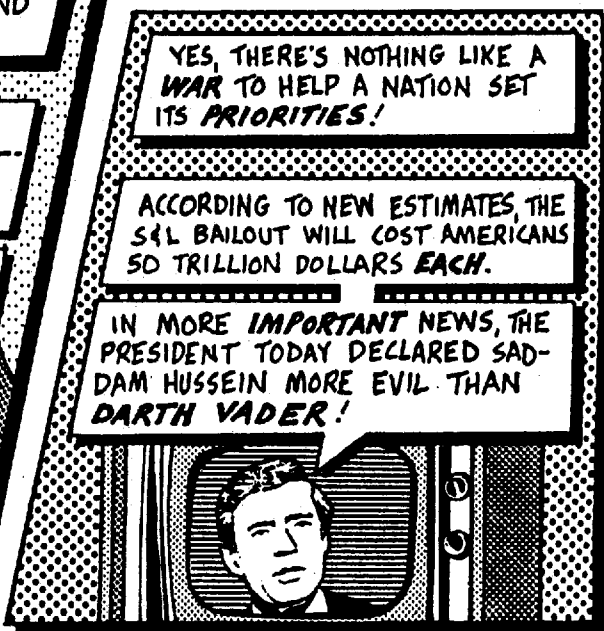
The small group that pays for the presidents and the congresses maintains its grip on the country through the media and the schools. After all, if people hadn't bought the idea that Noriega was the number one drug-dispenser, Panama could not have been illegally invaded so that Bush might not seem a wimp. Thousands of Panamanians died, as well as twenty-three American servicemen (nine of them killed by other Americans), for no purpose other than shoring up the image of the oligarchs' current spokesman, George Bush. Since the reading skills of the American people are the lowest in the First World, the general public is always easy prey to manipulation by television. This means that if you want to demonize drugs or the Arabs or the Japanese, you do so openly in the media. You also do it subliminally. As a result, in the past two years drugs was pushed from tenth to first place as a national worry. Now that communism has ceased to be the unholy devil, drug dealers, and users, are the enemy. Aircraft carriers are needed off the coast of Colombia to intercept drug exporters. And so two-thirds of the true budget will continue to go to the government in its latest "war" — a war that will not be won because no one has any interest in winning it, as opposed to expensively prose-

cuting it. The oligarchy does not care whether the citizens make themselves sick with drugs or not. What government wants is simple: total control. If this can be got by dispensing with the Bill of Rights, then that's a small price to pay. The whole tone of the Reagan-Bush management is one of open hostility to our ancient rights in particular and to the people in general. Today the poor, as Mr. Bush might put it, are in deep doo-doo. The rich are fed up with the poor. And if the poor don't shape up, the rich just aren't going to take it anymore.

The problem is money: who has it, who spends it and who gets what for what he paid. When it costs \$40 million to create a presidential candidate he is not going to show much interest in the people at large. He will represent the folks who gave him the \$40 million. Example: Bush. Since his election, what has he fought for? Environment? Education? No. His one crusade has been the cutting of the capital gains tax. That was the price the corporations demanded in exchange for buying him, rather than Dukakis, the presidency.

For thirty years I have made the same proposal to correct the great corruption. No candidate or party may buy time or space in the media. Give free media time and space to all candidates. Limit national

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election campaigns to six weeks, which is, more or less, what other First World countries do. A single act of Congress could make our elections unbuyable. However, those who have been elected by the present system are not about to change it.

The two parties, which are really one party, cannot be put to use. They are the country's ownership made carnival. Can the united action of individual citizens regain some control over the government? I think so. But it won't be easy, to riot in understatement. Attempts to cut back the war budget — whether the war be against communism or drugs or us — will be fought with great resourcefulness. When challenged with the billions of dollars wasted or stolen from the Pentagon, the establishment politician's answer is clear: Abortion is against God's law. He promptly changes the subject, the way a magician does when he catches your attention with one hand while the other picks your pocket.

Lately, though, our corporate oligarchs have become alarmed by one development in particular: the breakup of the nation-state almost everywhere. Since the nation-state, as we know it, is a nineteenth-century invention, I feel no sorrow at its demise. But those with orderly minds, eager to impose absolute order on others, are dismayed by the refusal of Latinos, say, to learn English, or Armenians to be Russian, or Québécois to be Canadian, and so on. I think this sudden worldwide desire for tribal identity is healthy, if only because our masters don't. Indeed, they have tried to make it impossible for us to use the word "race" for fear of being smeared by their media as racist — something they are but their critics often are not. Yet we are all racist to the extent that any of us feels that he belongs to a tribe, whether it be one of color or religion or some sort of shared identity.

In actuality, we are now faced with two movements. One is centrifugal: a rushing away from the confines of a nation-state, like the Soviet Union, or from any such iron order, equally unnatural, like heterosexuality, which was invented as recently as 1930.\* Simultaneously, there is a centripetal force at work: a coming together

of autonomous units for certain shared ends. Hence, the Common Market in Europe. Under a loose sort of confederation, the benefits of a common currency and joint environmental action can be shared by a great many tribes or races that choose, willingly, to cooperate. So we see, on the one hand, a healthy flight from the center in order to retain individuality, and, on the other, a healthy coming together to make a "more perfect life" for the residents of the common planet. Should centripetal forces defeat centrifugal longings, however, then welcome to the anthill society, and to our inglorious common death on a speck of used-up celestial matter.

OUR political debate — what little there is — can never speak of the future except in terms of the past. I shall, therefore, present a formula to restore the Republic by moving boldly forward into the past. I wish to invoke the spirit of Henry Clay. Thanks to our educational system, no one knows who he is, but for political purposes he can be first explained, then trotted out as a true America Firster who felt that it was the task of government to make internal improvements, to spend money on education and on the enlargement of the nation's economic plant. Clay, translated in a modern context, would have us abandon all military pretensions on the ground that we are too small and too poor a country to act as a global policeman. He would also suggest that we police ourselves first, and leave — terrible thought — Nicaragua to the Nicaraguans. Yes, Clay *could* be called an isolationist, but what's wrong with that? Our economic failure is making us more and more isolated from the rest of the industrialized world anyway. We could use this quiet time to restore our economic health, to take a few hundred billion dollars from military procurement and put it into education, into finding new ways of training and utilizing the work force, new ways of preserving or restoring earth and air and water. This does not seem to me

\* According to Jonathan Ned Katz in *Socialist Review* for February 1990, the word "heterosexual," still not acceptable to the O.E.D., first appeared in *The New York Times* (where else?) in 1930. Plainly a new category, outside the known sciences.

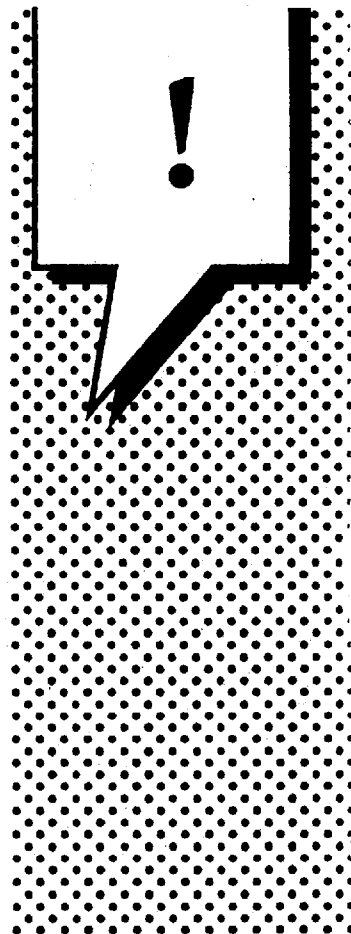
to be too ambitious a program. Also, ideologically, it is absolutely — even sublimely — reactionary, and therefore salable. But the highly progressive military-industrial-political complex will not easily let go. Ominously, our garrison state is now turning inward to create a police state. More than a million Americans are in prison or under constraint, the largest number, per capita, in the industrialized world. At least we are first at something. Currently there is a plan to reactivate old army camps to house drug users as well as pushers. Of course we could legalize drugs and get rid of the problem but where's the money in that? Where's the fun? Where's the control over all the people all the time?

Any optimistic signs? Yes. More and more of the people who never vote are beginning to worry about their personal finances. They are looking for explanations. And now that the Reagan magic act is over, the majority that does not vote can be reached. Not through the media but through videocassettes. One can make a videocassette very cheaply, with a movie star who will work for nothing, † in order

to explain, let us say, the ongoing S&L scandal. These cassettes can be given out free all over the country, which is the only way that the people can be directly addressed as they once were, in the eighteenth century, through pamphlets by the likes of Thomas Paine. I got the cassette idea from that lovable old curmudgeon Ayatollah Khomeini, who flooded Iran with radio tapes from his place of exile in Paris. With those tapes he brought revolution to Iran and overthrew the Shah. I think we can do as well from our exile here at home. We will also have helped create that educated citizenry without which Jefferson felt life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness not possible.

I began this discourse with Jefferson, as did the country, and I end with his great injunction that, should all else fail, the tree of liberty must still be nourished with the blood, if necessary, of tyrants and of patriots. Have a nice millenium. ■

† I know that it is elitist to use a star when a real expert, who is really boring just like everybody else, is available. But on the nuclear freeze, say, Paul Newman was worth a dozen senators.



## Who Owns the US?

In addition to his shelf-full of historical novels, Gore Vidal has been a keen observer of the contemporary political scene. This little book takes five interviews he gave between 1986 and 1989, combines the material and organizes it by topic. This is the first book in a "Real Story Series" by a new publisher; the idea is to make the ideas of progressive thinkers available to a wider audience (also in the works is a similar treatment of the speeches of Noam Chomsky). Whatever you may think of his opinions, Vidal delivers political analysis with style —

### Who Owns the US?

Gore Vidal, 1991; 96 pp.

\$5 (\$7 postpaid) from Odonian Press, Box 7776, Berkeley, CA 94707; 415/524-3143 (or Whole Earth Access)



he has elevated the put-down into an art form. Books on politics are not usually this much fun to read. —Richard Nilsen

• In 1950, the National Security Council was set in motion with NSC order #68, a blueprint for the state in which we still live, where 86 per cent of the federal revenue goes for war and the rest supports the largely irrelevant cosmetic government of Congress and Judiciary and the never-ending issues-less presidential elections.

Ollie North gave the game away on TV. In effect, he told the Senate, "We are the government of the United States and what are you clowns doing getting in our way? Don't you know that you are nobody? We are the government. We're saving freedom. We're saving mankind. And here you are screwing us up."

I gazed into those tiny little dishonest eyes and saw America, with a *k* that NSCers had inserted in place of our *c*.

• Legalizing drugs would remove all drug-related crime, which is most of organized crime. There would be no playground pushers, because there would be no money in it. It would be the end of the Mafia, the end of the CIA's running cocaine from Asia and Latin America, as it used to do during the Vietnam War and still seems to be

doing in Central America.

Most people don't want to die, so most people won't become addicts. The ones who will die are going to die anyway.

Beyond all the individual issues, the big one is, Do we want the state to be paternalistic and determine what we eat and drink, how we dress and so on? In my lifetime, we have moved away from a concept of the state as being something to run the post office. A convenience to protect persons and property.

For what it's worth, the founders didn't think that the Federal Government should be in the business of legislating private morals. To underline the point, they gave us a Bill of Rights.

I never thought I'd live to see the day when a President would get up in the Congress, where before him stood, symbolically, George Washington, Thomas Jefferson and Abraham Lincoln, and talk about *abortion*. Reagan symbolizes the end of the American republic.

Whether you have an abortion, what you put in your own body, with whom you have sex — these are *not* affairs of the state. A government does not exist to control the citizens. When it does, it is a tyranny, and must be fought. The tree of liberty, Jefferson warned us, must be refreshed with the blood of tyrants and patriots.

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