

Two Words That Killed the Golden Triangle – Lee Parks

One of my favorite TV shows from the '70s was science historian James Burke's documentary series "Connections." It demonstrated the unusual interconnectedness of ancient discoveries to modern technology. In that spirit is my account of a seemingly insignificant decision to put a sign up in the Town Hall that ended up destroying a gigantic economic development project that began 12 years ago. Caught in the mix are religious and economic liberty, and an overzealous government that went town building in the wrong place. I would like to note that these are my personal opinions and not necessarily shared by others in the neighborhood.

On May 3 Resolution No. 3160 from the Local Agency Formation Commission for San Bernardino County terminated plans by the town of Apple Valley to annex an area of county land known as the "Golden Triangle." This ended an expensive process that began on December 20, 2000 and was designed to change control of the potentially lucrative I-15 frontage area north of Johnson Road to Dale Evans Parkway to the town of Apple Valley from San Bernardino County.

Unfortunately no one on the past or present Town Councils decided to ask the residents if this was something they wanted before they spent untold amounts of taxpayer dollars on this fruitless project. If they had, they would have received an emphatic "no" from virtually all of the registered voters who actually live on the land. There is a reason that most of us who live in the area (as opposed to those bought vacant land as an investment) moved here in the first place. It was to get away from the restrictions and reckless spending (*read \$8 million animal shelter!*) cities and towns in the area are infamous for. And this is coming from someone who adopted two wonderful pit bulls from the original local shelters.

Late in the game the town had hired a consulting firm from LA to hold open meetings with the residents. The consultants were very professional and well meaning but at every meeting I attended, virtually every resident stated they did not want to be annexed. To the town's credit, it did its best to make the annexation less terrible for the residents by trying to grandfather in as many of our "unique" features as it could, but "less terrible" is still not nearly as good as the way we have it now. In general, the county takes good care of us and doesn't have ridiculous regulations like "RVs need to be on a cement pad" to be in your front yard like the town of Apple Valley wanted to force down our throats. In the case of this particular community, the cement pad would cost more than most of the RVs here are even worth.

While Apple Valley made many promises it said would manifest the town's motto of "A Better Way of Life!", it still comes down to who decides what a better way of life means. Those of us in the Golden Triangle agree that only we know what's best for us, and don't need a town telling us what the good life is. That means each of us gets to decide how best to achieve our founding principles of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness, and live accordingly.

In my opinion, the two most important facets of our nation that allowed us to become the only current superpower in the world are the free market economy and the separation of church and state. These ideas came out of the Enlightenment of Europe and America originating about 1650. According to Wikipedia, "It promoted science and intellectual interchange and opposed to superstition, intolerance and abuses in church and state. By freeing up our minds and bodies from the church and state, we had an unprecedented explosion of ideas and for the first time, the opportunity to achieve them. This led to the industrial revolution, and later to equal rights for minorities and women. We all owe an incalculable debt to our founding fathers for putting these concepts in our U.S. Constitution.

All of this leads me to the most important reason for my not wanting the town of Apple Valley to control any aspect of my life: The Town Council completely disrespects our secular nation's founding documents. This includes our godless constitution (complete with the Establishment Clause of the First Amendment), and the Treaty of Tripoli. Because it is not often taught in Apple Valley schools, I will make a short mention that the Treaty of Tripoli was composed by then President John Adams and received a *unanimous* ratification from the U.S. Senate on June 7, 1797, becoming the law of the land on June 10, 1797. How many laws today receive a unanimous vote? In an effort let the primarily Muslim nation know that we are a land of laws and not of dogma it contained the phrase, "the Government of the United States of America is not, in any sense, founded on the Christian religion." Feel free to look that one up.

As an atheist I realize I am in the minority in the High Desert. Fortunately I'm in good company as so are 73% of the scientists in the country (93% of the National Academy of Sciences) and many of the great minds throughout time who have brought us out of the dark ages. There is also an active atheist group in the area (www.highdesertatheists.com). For this and many other reasons, you can imagine how upset I am to witness the unconstitutional reciting of a Jesus-filled Christian invocation at every one of the Town Meetings I've attended in the last 9 years. I mentioned my displeasure to Councilman Scott Nassif who basically said he didn't agree, even though there is overwhelming case law to the contrary, going all the way up to the United States Supreme Court.

To add insult to injury, some Christian Propagandist decided to spend Apple Valley taxpayer money to put up an equally unconstitutional "One Nation Under God" sign in big letters behind the Town Council members chairs. For an atheist like me, that makes me feel like an outsider in my own community. To understand how I feel when I see this sign, it's the same way a Christian would feel if there was a "God is an Imaginary Sky Monster" or "Allah will Provide" or "Shiva Blesses You" sign in the same location. I wouldn't want to make people who believe differently than myself feel unwelcome in my community, so I wouldn't want any belief system given special treatment to the exclusion of all others. In fact, that's exactly what our Constitution protects us from. It's designed to protect minority groups from

majority subjugation. This is why our nation no longer allows slavery and women can now vote, among many other improvements since our founding.

For those who like to cite the “Under God” reference in our Pledge of Allegiance, it may come as a shock to you that those words were not in the original official pledge, they were added 62 years after it was written in 1954 by a particularly conservative congress under President Eisenhower. It was during the cold war and was pushed through as a way to help differentiate the United States from the Communist-enforced state atheism. State-forced atheism is as ridiculous as state-forced religion—people will believe what they believe.

The real danger of church/state relationships or “faith based” initiatives can be clearly seen in our past resulting in genocides (Old Testament, Native Americans, Holocaust) witch burnings and people flying airplanes into buildings, just to name a few. This is why our founding fathers, to use Thomas Jefferson’s words, “erected a wall between church and state.”

Perhaps James Madison said it best when he stated “Who does not see that the same authority, which can establish Christianity, in exclusion of all other Religions, may establish with the same ease any particular sect of Christians, in exclusion of all other Sects?” Jefferson’s *Notes on the State of Virginia* (1785) echoes a similar conviction: “The legitimate powers of government extend to such acts only as are injurious to others. But it does me no injury for my neighbor to say that there or twenty gods or no God. It neither picks my pocket nor breaks my leg.”

In the Golden Triangle, the residents have many beliefs, perhaps most importantly, the belief that you respect everyone’s right to believe what they like so long as they don’t impede on your rights, including your hard-earned tax dollars. My Christian neighbors are free to put up religious displays on their personal property, just as I’m able to put up a small dirt bike track on my property for my “religious observance.” We get along because we self-regulate to keep others out of our business and don’t use each other’s taxes for our personal beliefs. If someone crosses the line, a friendly phone call or personal visit fixes it without government interference or any tax dollars spent. In the Golden Triangle, “Live and Let Live” is our motto.

So, while my Christian neighbors may not have been offended by the Under God sign at Town Hall, I most certainly was. In fact, it prompted me to get politically active. I started going to meetings, talking to my neighbors and when the time came to come together, I rallied the troops going door-to-door collecting signatures. In a strange way, I must almost thank the town for forcing me to meet my reclusive neighbors and now have made some new friends. It has brought us together as a community for the first time since I’ve lived here and we are better and stronger for the experience.

Of the 55 registered voters in the Golden Triangle we needed 50% plus 1. That meant 29 signatures. In the two days I spent calling and visiting with a fellow neighbor, we collected 33 signatures (100% of who we talked to!), 30 of which were

considered valid by the county. With a margin of one, we would easily have lost had I not been motivated by those two little words to canvas the neighborhood. Ironically, even my own signature was not considered valid, as I had originally registered to vote at my business PO Box in Victorville many years ago, never thinking I'd need to be registered at the physical address. This, of course, has since been changed, should we face another fight in the future.

Whether carrying a copy of the *Bible* or *The Origin of Species*, the residents of the Golden Triangle will be even better-prepared next time!