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Bruce Fein

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## The Foundations Of Civilization

*Bruce Fein is a former Assistant Attorney General in the Reagan Administration.*

Thank you for all appearing today.

I want first to alert you all, as to why there might be some suspicions about my credulity. First, you need to know, I have no TV set; I don't go on Facebook or Twitter; I, in fact, read hard books, not off of Kindle, things like *Plutarch's Lives* in the real, hard volume. I never watched, or were concerned with *American Idol* or who wins the Super Bowl. I concern myself with the moral barometer of myself in the world. So you just need to know those kinds of background understandings.

The second observation I'd like to make is, today isn't the first time where mankind has given concern to the dangers from outer space, and what it could harbor. There's a tale told about Pope Calixtus III [r. 1455-58]—it may have been apocryphal—but, the Christians were battling the Ottoman Turks in Serbia and elsewhere. The Pope excommunicated Halley's Comet: He thought it was a bad omen for the outcome [of the war]. It didn't seem to affect the clash, and indeed, Oliver Cromwell took that to heart at the Battle of Marston Moor [1644] in the English Civil War. He instructed his troops, "Pray to God, but keep the powder dry." Still, very Earthbound.

Now, I want to discuss what I consider is necessary to make civilization worth preserving; because we have

to ask, well, there have been many other species that have gone extinct as well, and we don't necessarily mourn over the dinosaurs, for the lack of *Tyrannosaurus Rex*. So, we want to make certain that our species is worth preserving, before we decide to deflect all the dangers from outer space.

### A 'Civilization Genome Project'

So I've decided to undertake what I call the "Civilization Genome Project." It's different than the Human Genome Project, because it focuses on what we need, collectively, as humans, in organizing government and developing a political and social culture that's worthy

of survival; that raises us above an animal-like existence, whose preoccupation is with money, power, sex, and creature comforts; domination for the sake of domination. That's the animal-like existence that we, as humans, need to repudiate.

And I've attempted to make a sketch of what I describe as the "Misery Index of the World," and to ascribe what proportion is human beings killing, oppressing, persecuting other human beings, and what proportion is from tsunamis, natural disasters; well over 95% is human beings murdering, oppressing, dominating other human beings for reasons of bigotry, control, and other very pernicious motives. And if we want to make the life of society of the world better, we

need to focus in the short run, on stopping human beings from creating misery for others. And this is not just tens of thousands; this is billions. If you think of the oppression, killing of people because of gender; they can't go to school; they're killed because of their racial, or religious, or national, or ethnic affiliations—very, very bigoted and morally contemptible motivations.

Now, when we think about the bedrock, the Genome Project for government, the first principle that we have to accept, which has been repudiated for most, if not all of mankind, is the understanding that the final end of the state, is to make men and women free to develop their faculties and be morally accountable for their trajectories and destinies. That is the final end of the state. It's not to



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*Bruce Fein called for a "Civilization Genome Project," which would establish, as the first principle for government, that "the final end of the state, is to make men and women free to develop their faculties and be morally accountable for their trajectories and destinies."*

have a level of health insurance, or GNP, or unemployment; it's not to dominate others and be number one or number two in the world, where nations line up like football teams, who get rankings every week.

But that is the final end of the state: It is promoting individual challenge, strength, and happiness through their own ways. That is success. Success is *not* being able to tell other countries what to do. Success is *not* attempting to cram what you think virtue is, down the throat of somebody else. Success is giving every individual a fair opportunity to succeed in their individual ambitions. Say, that's the number-one precept that needs to be inculcated amongst *every single* government of the world! And that would reduce the Human Misery Index, many-fold overnight.

## Checks and Balances

Now, the second fundamental genome principle of civilization, is in the organization of government, recognizing that, because men are not angels, we must separate or fragment power, so no one faction can tyrannize over another. It's what our Founding Father James Madison styled, "making ambition counteract ambition." We cannot depend upon angelic features of those who cling to power, especially among the political species, who are not a random sample of the population. People are attracted to politics because they love domination, they have egomania. They need attention.

And that's why we need checks and balances. We know what will happen: You give them limitless power, no matter what their background. For example, the current occupant of the White House: He claims the authority to kill anyone on the planet that he says, in secret, "Hey! You may be an imminent danger. You may be associated with al-Qaeda. I need no checks; I always get it right." That's what happens with limitless power.

So checks and balances are *indispensable* to creating civilization. Without them, tyranny ensues. And that's in part a recognition that if we have to choose between a danger of too strong a government, that has to be endowed with some authority, because the [lives of] creatures in a state of nature, are what Hobbes described as "poor, brutish, nasty, and short—we know human nature is depraved without leadership, and we need government to prevent predation, stealing, killing. But, between choosing between a too-weak government, and a too-strong government, we know we have to choose for a weaker government, because government is always capable of vastly more evil than any in-

dividual or group of individuals.

If we think of the mass murders, the suicides, the genocides, Mao, Stalin, *hundreds* of millions! Hundreds of millions! The genocide, the Holocaust, compared to individual murders, dwarfs the amount of evil that can be perpetrated. And that's why the fundamental principle of all government action is, the rule is liberty; the exception is the encroachment on liberty. And the government *always* needs to surmount a very high hurdle to justify encroaching on your liberty—spying on you, detaining you, suppressing your speech—a *very, very high standard*. Because a government too strong is a government that will destroy the whole reason that we have civilization and liberty.

## Due Process of Law

Now, perhaps the most important idea in the history of civilization, and the one that has to be inscribed in our government, is *due process*. Due process of law. It was the first recognition of man that, "I could be wrong"; there's more than my way to look at an event. Nietzsche once said, there are no facts, only interpretations. There's great wisdom in that. There are multiple ways to interpret an event! You don't have a monopoly on wisdom. Due process: Before you impose any kind of sanction, any kind of penalty, hear the other side out, an opportunity for a defense, a decision by an impartial individual who has no vested interest in a particular outcome.

Due process: That intellectual humility, "*I could be wrong*," has to be a centerpiece of *every* Constitution, *every* governmental dispensation. Because we see what happens without due process: That is the history of injustice, right? Anonymous, unchallenged accusations that send anybody to prison, anyone to the death chambers.

Those are the fundamental principles of government that are essential to preserving civilization.

The last one, and perhaps the most important, is the understanding that nations, as nations, have no independent interest that transcends that of enabling all of its citizens to live free. There's no national interest in controlling resources, in expanding its territory, controlling oil supplies. This idea of national security—well, we don't dominate the East China Sea, the West China Sea, the Asia pivot, we have to control the Middle East—what is that? A nation as a nation, it's an artificial construct! They're only human beings! Nations are made of human beings. You say, "the goal of the nation"—the final end is to make the individual in that

nation free, to develop their faculties, and have moral accountability for what they do with their lives. That is success. The process itself is success.

These challenges that we confront are not at all novel. We aren't the first generation that has conceived of these necessities, in order to diminish the Misery Index of the world. And it goes back to the Old Testament of Ecclesiastes: "What has been will be again; what has been done will be done again. There is nothing new under the Sun." Now, that doesn't mean there are not new technologies; he wasn't writing at the age of the Internet, and I'm sure there will be something that will supersede the Internet. There are technological changes. But the motivations of mankind, the challenges to live a life that's beyond animal existence, has been with us from the outset. It's like the French say, "The more things change, the more they stay the same."

## Adult Virtues

Now, I've articulated at least the Genome Project with regard to how we can see and construct governments. But government alone is not the success story that we need to pursue. We need a political and a social culture as well, a political and social culture that undergirds these precepts of governmental action if you will, or limits on government. And perhaps the most important social, cultural norm, has to be one where you and I, the society in general, honors and applauds what I call the "adult virtues": wisdom, restraint, humility, modesty, resisting domination for the sake of domination; not selling our soul for a mess of potage. That's what the social culture needs to reward, not necessarily through money, but by giving deference and social status, applauding people who display those virtues, and ostracizing those who are like Donald Trump, or Bloomberg, or other people who flaunt wealth and utterly have philosophically empty lives! Empty! These people are moral wretches, and they need to be treated in that way!

And we need a culture, then, that rejects as juvenile, as something you grow out of at age five in the sandbox—the craving for sex, money, power, creature comforts, "Hey, pay attention to me"—all those ill-conceived habits that we see on every stage in the world, every day, in the world of politics. We have the most wretched people, who acquire, and assert, power, which has led, in the world, to this high-water mark of a Misery Index.

We need to go back, in our own private lives as well, and understand, as Socrates did, that the unexamined life is not worth living. Just existence for its own sake is

not good enough. We have to ask ourselves, "Why are we here? Why are we on this planet?" What can we do, to make life more gentle? More honorable, than exists simply by pursuing and seeking gratification for appetites? The higher life form.

And this is the challenge that civilization faces today, as it faced it yesterday, and it will face this challenge tomorrow. Because every individual is born with the same DNA, right? Doesn't matter where, whether you're in New Zealand or in Siberia, the United States, or Somalia. All the species start at the same point, the same DNA. And these same moral challenges are going to confront every generation! All we can do, the living generation, is, for those yet to be born, to preserve those standards of freedom and honor and morality, that will give them the same opportunity that we've enjoyed, to struggle against these evils that persist in mankind.

And that is what I suggest is our obligation in leaving the conference at the end of two days. We don't control the world. What we do control, is *us*! What we do control, is what motivates *our* lives. What we do control, is whether or not, within our space, within our ability to motivate others, we are able to live an honorable life that eliminates what we see as the oppression, the preoccupation with adolescent goals, that has led to the degradation of the species, whether we're on the edge of a thermonuclear war—we've been that way for a long time—most of you in the audience probably lived through the Cuban Missile Crisis, where we *did* think that maybe the Earth would perish, very soon.

But remember, *you* control your destiny, your moral life; you can have no excuse for blaming somebody else for that.

Now, we may not succeed. The history of mankind is not one that shows that people with the greatest and most noble ideas succeed. Many of them get burned at the stake; many of them perish without being rewarded at all for their courage and heroism. And we have to accept that that may be our possibility as well, because we know, in this audience, we are not the majority. The majority sits on Wall Street—they're defense contractors, they've got vast amounts of wealth. They exert vast amounts of political power. They have a monopoly on legalized violence.

But what they don't have, and what we have, is a philosophical soul, that marches forward, irrespective of these enticements that are intended to divert us from what we know is a higher life form.

Thank you.