

## Values are to Stand On

There's a game I used to play with my brothers in the swimming pool. We'd stand on kick boards, noodles, anything that would float, and pretend we could touch in the deep end. It looked pretty silly when we lost our balance. When it comes to government however, it's not a game anymore. Popular leaders have commanded public attention, tall, levelheaded, only to lose their balance. They come up coughing and choking, but always splashing away from the ground that they once claimed to stand on. Every leader *must* have values. Concrete values like respect for authority, human rights, honesty. Values they can stand on. John Dickinson understood this in a way that few men can.

In 1759, John Dickinson was elected to the Assembly in Delaware's Lower Counties, and for thirty years continued to serve his country with a quick pen and a brilliant mind. Many remember him as the delegate who refused to sign the Declaration of Independence, but few know that he was one of the first to take up arms to defend the infant country. Though a firm believer in a person's right to defend their liberties and themselves when attacked, Dickinson refused to support a declaration that he saw as only "for glory or for conquest."<sup>1</sup> This opinion matched him against the voices of legendary patriots like Samuel Adams, Patrick Henry, and nearly everyone else. After refusing to sign the Declaration of Independence, John Dickinson was turned out of Congress.

One of Dickinson's biographers states, "Dickinson never changed his principals... A conservative stance which seeks to withstand the ongoing currents of a dynamic world cannot, inherently, be a popular one."<sup>2</sup> After the war, though, everything changed. The country could no longer work together on the mere fever of liberty; it needed men with values that could



hold the weight of a nation. John Dickinson was elected to the Constitutional Convention. His experience had increased, but his values remained the same. Some historians believe that without Dickinson and several others, bringing together the Federalist and Anti-Federalist political parties, the US Constitution would never have been ratified.<sup>3</sup> Since that time, over 200 years have shattered the idealism and innocence of America's childhood, but have cemented further the concrete values which great men like John Dickinson stood for.

This is why, from the array of almost legendary founders, I would most like to speak with John Dickinson. But other great men had values. Other great men made sacrifices. True, but John Dickinson disagreed. What? John Dickinson disagreed. Not for votes. Not for recognition. And not when it was easy. As Christians in a wayward culture, we will inevitably disagree. I want to be prepared to stick to my values when they're popular – and when they're not, and still be a leader that makes a difference. Like John Dickinson.

First of all, I'd thank him for the gift he gave to our country. It's possible he's never been thanked before. Then I would ask questions. Questions that ardent historians can only guess at. Why did he don the uniform of the cause that appeared to reject him? And later, when the new country was at an arguably greater peril, dismiss retirement to fight for fair representation among citizens and states? I might agree. I might disagree. Values will conflict as long as they exist. But I'd mostly just listen.

This is an age where it is not only allowed, but expected, that any strong leader will change his mind about important issues one, two, even three times before he or she is truly comfortable with that belief, an age where personal beliefs are encouraged to keep out of



government, work force, and schools. I firmly believe that if I spoke to John Dickinson today, he would stand for the exact same things he stood for two-hundred years ago.

When leaders dive into the great swimming pool of life, leaving values behind them, they inevitably find themselves clinging to something, whether it is money, happiness, or the world's leakiest raft known as "The Polls." Hopefully it won't take the resurrection of one of history's great leaders like John Dickinson to remind America, "Wake up. Values are to stand on!"

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<sup>1</sup> Dickenson, John. "The Declaration on Taking up Arms."

Adopted by Congress on July 6, 1775

<sup>2</sup> From Revolution to Reconstruction - an .HTML project. 19 May 2004

<<http://odur.let.rug.nl/~usa/B/jdickenson/johnd1.htm>>

<sup>3</sup> Ahern, Gregory S. "The Spirit of American Constitutionalism: John Dickinson's *Fabius*

*Letters.*" HUMANITAS, Volume XI, No. 2, 1998 copyright National Humanities

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