



# The American



May 2003

Monthly Newsletter of the Miami Chapter, FLS&FR

Volume 2003, Issue 5

## Deism and our Founding Fathers

by Claire Horan\*

Winning Essay of the Knight Essay Contest in Florida

Perhaps because of contemporary implications, there is a huge controversy over whether or not the United States was founded on deist or Christian beliefs. Today citizens raise their voices against saying "under God" during the pledge of allegiance, while others argue that students should be forced to pay respect to the flag. Therefore, there is still much debate over the extent to which the founding fathers proscribed religious freedom for our country. While a small minority of influential men had read heavily the deist authors of the European Enlightenment, the better part of the 13 colonies was profoundly religious and were probably more spurred to action by the sermons they heard at church than from Thomas Paine's writings (John). Furthermore, although George Washington and Benjamin Franklin did not give themselves up to the Christian faith, they believed that Christianity helped most people to lead more moral lives. Deism, then, deeply influenced men, such as Thomas Jefferson, Benjamin Franklin, Ethan Allen, George Washington, Thomas Paine, John Adams, and James Madison, but this philosophy by no means dominated the thoughts of these great men.

Deism came about after the reformation had taken place and scholars could more safely question the veracity of scripture. The scientific principles which were discovered from 1550-1700 encouraged philosophers to look to nature to understand God. In his 1624 book, *Of Truth*, the Englishman Herbert of Cherbury recorded his five principles: belief in the Creator, the need to revere this Creator, the connection of worship with practical morality, the forgiveness of sins, and the eventual judgment of everyone (Johnson). The first three later became the basic tenets of deism. During the 17<sup>th</sup> century, writers like Locke and Hobbes tried to reconcile reason to

Christianity, but later writers, like John Toland, Thomas Woolston, and Matthew Tindal argued against the divinity of Jesus and the manipulations of the clergy (Johnson). The main contribution of the French deists, most notably Collins and the Earl of Shaftsbury, was the idea that God had created the universe and the laws of nature and then stepped away from it (Johnson). This idea is often analogized by the watchmaker and his watch.

Deism began to catch on in America just as it was becoming popular in France. Thomas Paine wrote *The Age of Reason*, which raised serious doubts about the credibility of the Bible, while Ethan Allen, who is famous for having captured Fort Ticonderoga, wrote *Reason: the Only Oracle of Man*. Elihu Palmer offered deism to the common man in his treatise *Principles of Nature*, where he argues that all the information we have about God comes from the Creation (Johnson). Because of this, deist ideas offer more freedom to the individual to reason for him/herself rather than having to listen to the interpretations of the clergy.

In accordance with Paine's ideas, Thomas Jefferson argued in his private letters that we should approach religion with reason because he thought of rational thought as God's dearest gift'. In fact, Jefferson went so far as to claim that Jesus was a deist and that the church had perverted the social teachings of Jesus (Lerner 108). *The Jeffersonian Bible*, originally published as *The Life and Morals of Jesus of Nazareth*, is Jefferson's edition of the gospels, completely devoid of supernatural references.

Each of these writers undoubtedly thought people would be better off if they adhered to the spiritual philosophy of deism, but others, like George Washington and Benjamin Franklin, were more

## Minutes of the meeting of the Board of Directors, 07 May 2003

The Miami Chapter Board of Directors Meeting was held on the 7<sup>th</sup> day of May 2003 in the Law Office Conference Room of Past President John Thomson, 370 Minorca Ave., Coral Gables, Florida.

### Members Present:

Saul Montes-Bradley, President  
David Mitchell, First VP  
Dick Friberg, Treasurer  
Al Myers, Genealogist  
Bob Sovacool, Chaplain  
Ken Harrison, Historian  
Bob Liebler, Past President  
Charles Humphries, Past President  
Jack Thomson, Past President

President Montes-Bradley called the meeting to order at 7:30 PM and led the Pledge of Allegiance to the Flag of the United States, followed by invocation by Chaplain Bob Sovacool.

Dick Friberg distributed copies of the April Treasurer's Report. Only three unpaid dues for 2003.

David Mitchell moved Treasurer's Report be approved. Seconded and carried.

Al Myers moved minutes of April Board Meeting be approved. Seconded and carried.

Discussion followed on Memorial Day, May 26 at 6:30 PM North Miami Beach, Color Guard. Full Uniform.

President Montes-Bradley has available a CD on American Heritage suitable for Elementary, Middle, and High Schools.

Dick Friberg advised that Roger Shurtleff resigned as 2<sup>nd</sup> Vice President.

Discussion followed on our By-Laws and the need to up date same. Dick Friberg and Jack Thomson to head a committee to up date our by-

laws.

Discussion followed on our activities for July: Key Biscayne Color Guard in the AM, 4<sup>th</sup> of July Picnic, West Miami Color Guard PM, Coral Gables fireworks Color Guard in the PM.

Charles Humphries requested volunteers to present JROTC Medals and Certificates to various High Schools. Cards were distributed to Board Members who were able to present the SAR Medal and Certificate.

May Luncheon to be held Friday May 23<sup>rd</sup> at the RENAISSANCE, 2340 SW 32<sup>nd</sup> Ave, Miami, Florida.

Next Miami Chapter SAR Board Meeting to be held Wednesday June 3<sup>rd</sup>.

Al Myers moved meeting be adjourned. Seconded and carried.

Benediction by Chaplain Bob Sovacool.

Ken Harrison, Acting Secretary

### Officers 2003-2004

**President** Saul M. Montes-Bradley saul@bradleyfoundation.org  
One Turnberry Plaza, Suite 500 Aventura, FL 33180305-933-6348

**1st Vice-President** David B. Mitchell Mitchellesq@aol.com  
2655 LeJeune Rd., # 1001 Coral Gables, FL 33134 305-461-5015

**Secretary/Registrar** David C. Miller demiller@aol.com  
351 Deer Run, Miami Springs, FL 33166 305-888-8065

**2nd Vice President**  
Roger W. Shurtleff, Jr.  
608 Tortoise Way  
Satellite Beach, FL 32937-3830  
321-773-2005  
rwsrealty@earthlink.com

**Treasurer**  
Richard E. Friberg  
7655 SW 83rd Court  
South Miami, FL 33143  
305-271-9336  
dicklouisemanj@aol.com

**Historian**  
Kenneth E. Harrison  
5921 SW 10th Street  
West Miami, FL 33144  
305-266-0397  
ken5921@aol.com

**Genealogist**  
Dr. Albert E. Myers  
13901 Old Cutler Road  
Miami, FL 33158  
305-235-1525  
aem@ezonline.com

**Chaplain**  
Robert C. Sovacool  
18004 SW 89th Place  
Miami, FL 33157  
305-235-7277  
sovacool@bellsouth.com

**Immediate Past President**  
Dr. Robert E. Liebler  
6510 SW 93rd Ave.  
Miami, FL 33173  
305-271-9251  
efliebler1@aol.com

reluctant to express their personal beliefs.

Franklin wrote in Poor Richard (1758) that light-houses are better than churches because "faith is to ignore reason" (Johnson). However, in his autobiography he relates that he converted some friends to Deism, only to become disappointed with their lack of morality (Johnson). He became convinced that most people needed the reward/punishment mentality of Christianity to make good decisions. Washington agreed that Christianity was necessary for civil behavior. There is even some controversy over whether Washington was, indeed, a deist. However, Arthur B. Bradford, a contemporary minister, wrote of him that, "While Washington was very deferential to religion and its ceremonies, like nearly all the founders of the republic, he was not a Christian, but a Deist" (Johnson).

Some modern deists believe that deism provided a justification for the colonies to rebel against England. Romans 13 of the Bible, they say, prohibits rebellion against government because it is instituted by God (Johnson). However, it is doubtful that the colonists would look so far for a justification when they felt they were being wronged by unfair taxes and treatment by the British monarchy. Although deism undoubtedly advises that individuals risk everything for reason and ideals, it is more useful to study deism's influence on the writers of the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution, as deism was "confined to intellectual discussions in academic and theological circles on the east coast" (John).

The founding fathers were not interested in abolishing Christianity in favor of deism. To the contrary, they felt that everyone should be able to choose for themselves as they had done. Because Jefferson thought that educated citizens were very important (Lerner 108), he wanted to make sure that America offered not only religious freedom, but freedom of speech, which is addressed in the first amendment (Schultz). Jefferson wrote at some point, "I have sworn eternal hostility against every form of tyranny of the mind of man" (Lerner 107). These deists were not in opposition to Christian virtues, but rather to the oppressive power of the church and its dogma. Paine, in fact, viewed deism as more inclusive than other religions because he felt that every man was "a deist in the first article of his creed," referring to not only Christians but Jews and Muslims as well

(Johnson). Because everyone is blessed with reason, the founding fathers believed each citizen should be able to choose their own religion and beliefs. Jefferson felt that religion existed between each man and God and should not be threatened by powers outside that relationship. Paine declared, "My own mind is my own church" (Johnson). To that I believe we can safely substitute the words "temple," "shrine," or "mosque." Thanks to the visions of a few statesmen and many more soldiers, we can honestly say, "to each his own."

\* Claire Horan is a Grade 12 Student at Eastside High School, Gainesville, Florida. Her winning essay was presented at the Annual Meeting of the Florida Society in Sarasota by Kevin Yarnell, State Chairman of the Knight Essay Contest Committee

### President's Corner

by Saul M. Montes-Bradley

The Annual meeting of the Florida Society took place in Sarasota May 2-4. During the proceedings, Comp. Yarnell presented the essay featured in this issue of The American, and it occurred to me to present it to Miami Chapter members. I always find it extremely pleasurable to see what our kids are capable of doing, and hope that you will, too.

Coming back to our Chapter, we are in the process of planning our meetings for the remainder of the year. If there is any subject you'd like presented, have a speaker to recommend, or would like to make any other suggestions, please contact any of the Board members before the July Board meeting.

The Directory for 2003-2004 should be ready for mailing by the end of July.



Compatriots Richard E. Friberg and Saul M. Montes-Bradley with Sons of Liberty Commander Rollin L. "Bud" Bauchspies, Jr. during Color Guard drills at the Annual Meeting of the Florida Society

# The American

Miami Chapter, Florida Society  
Sons of the American Revolution  
351 Deer Run  
Miami Springs, FL 33166



Are *YOU* coming to  
SAR meetings?

The American

## Calendar

**23 May**

**11:30 AM - Luncheon Renaissance Restaurant, 2340 SW 32<sup>nd</sup> Ave. Miami, Florida**

**26 May**

**10:AM - Posting of the Colors, All Wars Memorial, 16500 NE 16th Avenue, N. Miami Beach**

**31 May**

**1:00-4:00 PM - Tequesta Society, CAR Annual Picnic - Be there!**

Choose what YOU want to bring to the cookout & get directions.

R.S.V.P. By Tuesday, May 27th to Will or Michael Prah at 305. 667.8452 or prahl@earthlink.net

**04 June 7:30 PM - Board Meeting at Law Offices of Comp. Jack Thompson.**

**27 June 11:30 AM - Luncheon Renaissance Restaurant, 2340 SW 32<sup>nd</sup> Ave. Miami, Florida**

**02 July 7:30 PM - Board Meeting at Law Offices of Comp. Jack Thompson**

**04 July** We will be marching at several locations, including Key Biscayne, West Dade and Coral Gables at various times during the day, pausing for a picnic at Dick Friberg's. Details to follow in the June issue.