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The year is 1944.  The world is at war in one of the most important conflicts in history: World War II. A soldier, a man from a small town in the United States, is crouching in a trench along with hundreds of other men in a foreign land with foreign soldiers firing at them.  It feels as if his heart is beating as fast as the bullets flying past his head. It is in this moment that he makes the most important decision of his short time on Earth.  *Will he risk his life defending his country or will he save himself?* This man, like thousands of other Americans before and after him, had decided to protect the freedom of his country by leaving his home to fight a war a world away. American men and women have sacrificed their personal leisures, liberties, and lives in order to preserve the culture of the country; the country that in turn protects the personal rights of the people.  To these brave people, the common good of America is more essential to American society because the common liberties of the people can only be protected if what is good for the country is achieved first.  This idea of citizens supporting the country must be adopted at a personal level and as a country in general.  Looking at the history of the United States, this theme becomes apparent in the construction, structure, and execution of the American government and society.

During the period of the Enlightenment, many Europeans had new ideas about authority and nature. They proposed new perspectives about the role of government in people’s lives.  Some of these ideas were used when the Founding Fathers wrote the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution of the United States. A unique aspect about some of the people of the Enlightenment was how they envisioned and described the relationship between the common man and the government he to which he submitted.  John Locke was an Enlightenment thinker that stood out in this regard.  John Locke described a social contract between the government and the public.  In this contract, a person gives up some of his individual rights in order to preserve and “maintain order and enforce the law of nature” (Elahi).  The person keeps his natural rights, which are inalienable and cannot be taken away by the government.  Following this theory, the only way for a person to live in a peaceful and stable nation is to give up his own ability to manage personal security for himself.  He describes many benefits by following this theory; “The only way whereby any one divests himself of his natural liberty, and puts on the bonds of civil society, is by agreeing with other men to join and unite into a community for their comfortable, safe, and peaceable living one amongst another, in a secure enjoyment of their properties, and a greater security against any, that are not of it” (Locke, Two Treatises). When a person decides to forgo his “natural liberty,” he gains peace, security, and protection from others who are not in agreement with him as well as other benefits.

An example of this is the Georgian tax called the Special Purpose Local Option Sales Tax (SPLOST).  This tax “authorizes a county tax of 1% on items subject to the state sales tax for funding capital projects” (Augusta).  The people of Georgia must submit to an extra sales tax of items purchased.  By submitting to this, they give up the personal right to pay less for the goods they buy.  However, the money that is collected by the sales tax is used for “specific capital outlays … such as courthouses, jails, roads and bridges” (Augusta).  All of these are benefit that people in the area use for a variety of purposes and are essential for the function in a society.  Without this tax, many of these crucial public amenities would not be available.  In this situation, it is more beneficial for the people to give up their personal rights in order to cater to what is good for all of the people around them, aka, the common good.

The idea of a social contract with the government had its genesis along with birth of the United States.  After winning independence, the young American nation had to create a new government with no direct model to base it on. Therefore, the Constitution was born. The Constitution is the American document that sets the blueprint for how the country is lead and was created from the creativity of those seeking enlightened leadership and freedom. However, before many of the states ratified the Constitution, the leaders of the states demanded a Bill of Rights be created to protect the individual rights of the people. The Framers promised to produce this document and the Constitution was ratified.  One could use this piece of history to argue that the rights of the individual were more important to the states than the common good; however, the opposite is true.  While they did not have to, all thirteen colonies agreed that unifying under the Constitution was more important than remaining separate because of the lack of protection of individual, as well as commonly protected rights. The states first had to submit to what was good for the public in order to protect the rights that the citizens desired to have independently.  In the end, the states achieved their wish in the form of “Amendment IX: The enumeration in the Constitution, of certain rights, shall not be construed to deny or disparage others retained by the people” (Bill of Rights). As soon as the states decided to do what was best for the united country, they naturally received what was best for them individually.

The birth of the United States is an excellent example of what happens when people decide the common good is more important than individual rights.  However, what happens when people decide individual rights are more important than the common good? An example of this is the Salem witch trials of 1692, in which about twenty people were hanged and hundreds accused on charges of witchcraft.  The charges originally were made by several young girls. The adults of Salem listened to the concerns of the girls and took action. The girls and their rights had been violated and the fear of being the next victim took over the town.  The leaders in the society focused more on protecting and rectifying the rights of the individual girls than the common good of the town.  The protagonist in the novel *The Crucible*, John Proctor, tries to promote the idea of the common good when he accuses Abigail of lying about the witchcraft.  However, when she claims her personal right of life was almost sacrificed when she says, “I have been near to murdered every day because I done my duty pointing out the Devil’s people” (Miller 100), the court ignores every attempt of preserving the peace in the town in order to protect Abigail’s rights.  As a result, other people’s individual rights were taken away when twenty of the accused were killed because of the madness. Had the common good of the town been considered, the natural right of life that Locke speaks of would have not been taken away for the accused.

The United States of America is universally known for the freedoms it protects.  The famous first amendment of the Bill of Rights sets forth five basic rights that are the foundation for our country and personal freedoms: the freedom of religion, of speech, of press, of assembly, and petition.  These freedoms have made America a haven for people from all over the world.  These rights would have not come into being if a young country had not put aside its internal political squabbles and acted for the benefit of the general public.  Conversely, the country would not be what it is today if the people had not been willing to come together to build a better nation.  The common good is essential in American society because catering to what is universally good for everyone enables the protection of individual rights.

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