



Written by [Joe Wolverton, II, J.D.](#) on November 7, 2023

## Obsta Principiis: Have We Waited too Long to Save Our Constitution and Our Freedom?

The spirit of liberty is, and ought to be, a jealous, a watchful spirit. *Obsta Principiis* is her motto and maxim; knowing that her enemies are secret and cunning, making the earliest advances slowly, silently and softly, and that according to her unerring oracle Tacitus, “The first advances of tyranny are steep and perilous, but when once you are entered, parties and instruments are ready to espouse you.” It is one of these early advances, these first approaches of arbitrary power, which are the most dangerous of all, and if not prevented, but suffered to steal into precedents, will leave no hope of a remedy without recourse to nature, violence, and war.



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— John Adams (writing as “Governor Winthrop,” February 9, 1767)

*Obsta principiis* — Latin for “resist at the beginning.” This was the alarm sounded by our Founding Fathers regarding the “silent and gradual” encroachment of despotism into the land of liberty. But our Founders didn’t coin that phrase; in fact, they didn’t even finish it.

They learned this principle, as they did so many others, from the Latin authors that they read, regarded, and recorded in their commonplace books. In the case of *obsta principiis*, that Latin author is Ovid.

In his *Remedia Amoris*, Ovid writes, “*Principiis obsta, sero medicina paratur, cum mala per longas convaluere moras,*” which in English means, “Resist at the beginning, else by long delay the disease grows so strong that medicine is useless.”

While the shortened proverb is capable of standing alone, the full sentence provides context and additional motivation to move quickly to quash the forces of tyranny that continue their steady advance into the territory conquered by our Founding Fathers more than two centuries ago.

We are being warned to derail the infamous “long train of abuses and usurpations” before its length and speed make it nearly impossible to impede its perilous progress.

Have we failed to *obsta principiis*? Have we delayed treatment so long that we’ve allowed the disease of despotism to grow so that there is no medicine strong enough to stop its spread and save our body politic?

No! There is yet time to save our country, our constitution, and the liberty it protects.

Thomas Jefferson, the source of the phrase “long train of abuses and usurpations” is the author of another phrase, one that offers hope for healing our political illnesses: “rightful remedy.”

In the Kentucky Resolutions, Jefferson diagnosed the disease, described its spread, and prescribed the proper treatment:



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That this commonwealth considers the federal union, upon the terms and for the purposes specified in the late compact, as conducive to the liberty and happiness of the several states: That it does now unequivocally declare its attachment to the Union, and to that compact, agreeable to its obvious and real intention, and will be among the last to seek its dissolution: That if those who administer the general government be permitted to transgress the limits fixed by that compact, by a total disregard to the special delegations of power therein contained, annihilation of the state governments, and the erection upon their ruins, of a general consolidated government, will be the inevitable consequence: That the principle and construction contended for by sundry of the state legislatures, that the general government is the exclusive judge of the extent of the powers delegated to it, stop nothing short of despotism; since the discretion of those who administer the government, and not the constitution, would be the measure of their powers: That the several states who formed that instrument, being sovereign and independent, have the unquestionable right to judge of its infraction; and that a nullification, by those sovereignties, of all unauthorized acts done under colour of that instrument, is the rightful remedy.

Did you catch it? States, as creators of the federal government and source of the entirety of its power, retain the authority to enforce the terms of the contract — the U.S. Constitution, where the powers granted to the federal government are listed — and to refuse to enact, enforce, fund, or follow any act of the federal government that falls outside of that body’s constitutionally established authority.

Jefferson uses the word “nullification” for this refusal by states to allow the federal government to extend beyond the borders of its constitutionally enumerated power. He calls nullification the “rightful remedy” and recognizes the right of the states to administer that powerful potion.

Fortunately for the future of freedom, the remedy of nullification is fast-acting when administered consistently. State legislators and governors are much more amenable and accountable to the people than are their federal colleagues, and as such the people of the several states can exert prompt and powerful influence on their state governments.

How may the men and women of the states exert this immense power? They must seek out and elect to state assemblies and governors’ mansions men and women committed to remaining faithful to the oath to support the U.S. Constitution required in Article VI, as well as being committed to stopping at the sovereign border of their respective states all unconstitutional federal programs or policies.

While we have not resisted tyranny at the beginning, and our body politic is ravaged with the sickness of statism and socialism, we may still save our country and our Constitution by electing state legislators and governors who will watch that our sickness spreads no further, and by consistently and quickly administering the “rightful remedy” of nullification.

I’ll give the last word to the immeasurably influential John Trenchard, writing as “Cato” in 1722, and pray that we follow his liberty and life-saving counsel:

“Now, therefore, my best friends, is the time to help yourselves: Now act honestly and boldly for liberty or forget the glorious and charming sound. Let not a public traitor come within the walls of your cities and towns without treating him as an enemy.”



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