

# WHITHER INDEPENDENCE— 1980 A.D. ?



It might be more appropriate to hold a memorial service for American independence than to celebrate it in the Year of Our Lord 1980 and of our independence 204. There is certainly reason for questioning the extent of our independence today. In any case, it is surely in order to assess where we seem to be headed on the matter of independence and to call to mind the ideals which called this country into being.

The "Fourth of July," Independence Day, is, of course, a day set aside to mark the anniversary of our independence from England. It was on that day in 1776 that those of the

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members of the Second Continental Congress who could and would signed the Declaration of Independence. From the earliest years, however it came to mean more than that. It caught up the aspirations of America. The American dream of an empire for liberty took on body in the Fourth of July celebrations, which, before too many years, became national in scope.

The ideal of independence had at least three dimensions from the outset. They were not separate dimensions but were intertwined with one another. One dimension was *national independence*. A second was the *independence of the states*. The third was *personal independence*. All three dimensions were believed to be the necessary condition for individual liberty.

Almost from the beginning, national independence meant much more than removing English political control from America. It meant that, of course, and that was what the Declaration of Independence was about. Beyond that, however, thoughtful Americans were not long in concluding that it would be best to follow a politically independent course toward Europe generally. To that end, provisions should be made to retire the foreign debt, the United States should avoid making alliances which entangled them in European quarrels, and, in general, avoid dependence on foreign governments.

George Washington stated the ideal clearly and directly, yet diplomatically, in his Farewell Address:

The great rule of conduct for us in regard to foreign nations is, in extending our commercial relations to have with them as little *political* connection as possible. So far as we have already formed engagements let them be fulfilled with perfect good faith. Here let us stop.

He went on to point out that the United States enjoyed the advantage of distance from Europe and could, by making the effort, gain the necessary respect to have other nations leave us alone. He recommended independence strongly:

Why forego the advantages of so peculiar a situation? Why quit our own to stand upon foreign ground? Why, by inter-

weaving our destiny with any part of Europe, entangle our peace and prosperity in the toils of European ambition, rivalry, interest, humor, or caprice?

He made clear, however, that in recommending independence he was appealing to enduring principles, not simply a favorable set of circumstances:

Harmony, liberal intercourse with all nations are recommended by policy, humanity, and interest. But even our commercial policy should hold an equal and impartial hand, neither seeking nor granting exclusive favors or preferences . . . , constantly keeping in view that it is folly in one nation to look for disinterested favors from another; that it must pay with a portion of its independence for whatever it may accept under that character. . . . There can be no greater error than to expect or calculate upon real favors from nation to nation.

But this was more than presidential rhetoric; it was the cogent statement of what was an American ideal in the nineteenth century. While he was President, Washington had to take a stand on American national independence. When war broke out in Europe in the wake of the French Revolution, both France and England tried to involve the United States in it. Washington proclaimed the neutrality of the United States, and this proclamation was later affirmed by the Congress.

During the Napoleonic Wars other Presidents and Congresses

took even stronger action to follow an independent course. There was the Embargo Act of 1807, the Non-Intercourse Act of 1809, and Macon's Bill Number 2, passed in 1810. Finally, when the United States went to war against England in the War of 1812, it did so independent of the other warring powers, or, as President Madison put it in his war message: "avoiding all connections which might entangle it in the contest or views of other powers. . . ." <sup>1</sup> Indeed, until well into the twentieth century, the United States followed a resolutely independent course in international affairs.

### **National Independence from Control by Foreign Nations**

National independence, then, means the independence of the United States government from domination, control, or political influence of foreign nations. It carries with it, of course, the freedom of the American people from such domination or control. It does not connote any opposition to trade, exchanges, or discourse between the people of the United States and those of other lands nor of the dependencies and interdependencies that may arise from these activities. And it certainly does not mean that the government of the United States is independent of the electorate, nor the branches of the government entirely independent of one another, nor

that the federal government is independent of the states.

The original states were independent of the United States government in that they existed prior to the national government. They were formed before the Articles of Confederation were adopted. They had governments and constitutions of several years standing when the United States Constitution was ratified. They retained most of their independence under the Constitution, and when new states came into the union they shared in such independence.

The federal system of government was devised for the purpose mainly of enabling the states to retain their independence. There was some talk at the Constitutional Convention of a consolidated government under which the states would become mere appendages. The idea did not gain favor. On the other hand, there was much sentiment in favor of a general government which would not be dependent upon the states for its revenue and force. They attempted to resolve the problem by tracing the authority and power of the general government to the people. This is not only stated in the Preamble—"We the people of the United States . . . do ordain and establish this Constitution for the United States of America"—but also by the method of ratification and choosing those who would govern.

There are some lines of dependence running both ways between the United States government and those of the states. For example, the original states were to come into the union by holding ratifying conventions. The initiative for doing so rested with the states. (The question never was answered as to what would happen to a state which did not ratify the Constitution, and the document itself is silent on the point.) Elections are held within states for Federal officeholders, and some of the rules are left to state determination. Moreover, in the original Constitution, Senators were to be appointed by state legislatures. The states are dependent upon the United States government for the conduct of foreign relations, for the regulation of commerce, and to "suppress Insurrections and repel Invasions." Also, the United States is charged with guaranteeing to each state a republican form of government.

### **Independence of the States**

The ideal, however, was the independence of the states. At one place in the Constitution, as noted, the general government is authorized to suppress insurrections. At another, however, it says that "on the Application of the Legislature, or of the Executive (when the Legislature cannot be convened)" the United States shall protect each of them

"against domestic violence." The tendency of this is to leave to the states the initiative in seeking aid from the general government.

The crucial point, though, is that the powers to be exercised by the states are not set forth in the United States Constitution. They do not, therefore, derive from it. Certain powers are denied to the states. For example, "No State shall enter into any Treaty, Alliance, or Confederation. . . ." Beyond the denial of certain powers to the states, however, there is only the provision of the Tenth Amendment: "The powers not delegated to the United States by the Constitution, nor prohibited by it to the States, are reserved to the States respectively, or to the people." In short, the powers of the states have an origin independent of the United States. They exist in their own right and are not derivative.

There are beliefs so firmly ingrained, so generally accepted, and so much a part of a people's make-up that they do not feel a need to make extended statements about them. The belief in the desirability of personal independence was like that for Americans. They made no proclamations about it, issued no manifestos, nor ever set aside a day for it. (One exception comes to mind, the Declaration of Female Independence set forth in the 1840s. But that had political overtones.) Americans were

long vocal about their rights. Individual liberty was the subject of treatises, declamations, essays, and even poems. As George Washington said in his Farewell Address, "Interwoven as is the love of liberty with every ligament of your hearts, no recommendation of mine is necessary to fortify or confirm the attachment."

### Independence of the Individual

By contrast, the desirability of personal independence was an assumed value. One can glean it from folk sayings such as that a man ought to stand on his own two feet, that he ought to be beholden to no one, and the longing with which boys looked forward to becoming men of their own. The belief in it as a value did lead some to write essays on self-reliance. It was the usually unstated means to the widely valued end of self-fulfillment. It moved Jefferson to write these words in favor of the agricultural over the industrial way of life: "Those who labor in the earth," he said, "are the chosen people of God, whose breasts he has made his peculiar deposit for substantial and genuine virtue. It is the focus in which he keeps alive that sacred fire. . . . It is the mark set on those, who not looking up to heaven, to their own soil and industry, as does the husbandman, for their subsistence, depend for it on casualties and caprice of customers. Depen-

dence begets subservience and venality, suffocates the germ of virtue, and prepares fit tools for the designs of ambition. . . ." Whether Jefferson was correct or not about the virtues of the agricultural life, he bespoke a common belief in the necessity of personal independence as the bulwark of a free republic. As he put it, "It is the manners and spirit of a people which preserve a republic in vigor. A degeneracy in these is a canker which soon eats to the heart of its laws and constitution."<sup>2</sup>

If one man had to be chosen as the apostle of personal independence in America, I would nominate Benjamin Franklin. He did not write much directly about it, yet it was the central concern of so much that he did write in *Poor Richard's Almanac*. Note these admonitions about going into debt:

. . . Then since, as he [Poor Richard] says, *The Borrower is a Slave to the Lender, and the Debtor to the Creditor*, disdain the Chain, preserve your Freedom; and maintain your Independency: Be *industrious and free*; be frugal and free.<sup>3</sup>

Franklin wrote ever and again about the importance of work, of rising early, of applying oneself diligently, of doing without luxuries, of saving, of investing, and so on. He did not always connect these admonitions with independence, but he did often enough to make clear that it was a central goal, as when he said:

"Frugality and Industry freeing me from my remaining debt, and producing affluence and independence. . . ."4

Perhaps the best evidence of all of the role of the ideal of personal independence is the great propulsive migrations by which America was settled. In the hope of independence, people crossed the ocean, went into the wilderness, hacked out a clearing, built rude houses, and sought to make a living. In the same quest, they moved out upon the Great Plains, devised ways to turn the heavy sod, learned to make do without trees, and began to produce the great quantities of grain for which America became famous. Nor did it end there. Others sought passes through the Rocky Mountains, loaded their Conestoga wagons, and pressed on to the Pacific. The vision that drew them was of a place of their own, hopefully fertile, where a man might raise his children in independence, and look after his own. This quest was in considerable measure the saga of America.

### **Avoid Entangling Alliances**

George Washington believed that the key to national independence was to abstain from *permanent* alliances with foreign powers. Temporary alliances might properly be formed from time to time for joint purposes. He approved, too, acting with other peaceful nations to ad-

vance rules of trade and exchange. For example, presumably he would have favored such things as international copyright agreements. My main point, however, is that it was the permanency of alliances that he thought crucial. *Entangling* alliances were also often proscribed in the early years of the Republic. Those are alliances in which there are prior commitments to actions in which one may be drawn by other nations.

There is a clue in this to the maintenance of independence, whether of nations, states within a nation, or individuals. As noted earlier, independence does not imply a lack of relations with others. Indeed, there is some measure of dependency entailed in all interaction; production, construction, trade, commerce, sports, entertainment, public worship, communications, and so on, require interdependency. To forgo this would be to forgo all social cooperation, and if it were consistently carried out life itself would become impossible.

The distinction is not between independence and dependence or interdependence; rather, as Thomas Jefferson suggested, it is between independence and *subservience*. To put it another way, independence is threatened or being lost at the point at which dependence becomes *subservience*.

When does dependence become

subservience? Dependence is on the way to becoming, if it has not already become, subservience when it becomes permanent. Dependence is headed for subservience when one becomes so entangled with others in interdependency that he can no longer determine his course. To put it more broadly, dependency becomes subservience at the point at which one party regularly serves the other(s) at the behest of the latter. When interdependence loses its mutuality, subservience follows.

### **Seeds of Servitude Within the Family**

Pathological conditions that sometimes develop in children-parent relationships illustrate the permanency factor. Infants and small children are dependent upon their parents, more or less absolutely. As the children grow up, they learn and are taught how to become progressively independent. If, however, the child insists upon being served by his parents regularly after he could do for himself, he is trying to induce servitude into the relationship. On the other hand, if parents cling to their grown children, insist on their living at home and doing for them, that can become a form of servitude. Permanent dependency begets servitude.

Entanglement is the mode of collectivism. Collectivist democracy is a device for getting everyone's af-

fairs entangled with everyone else's. Collectivism proceeds by describing our interdependencies as requiring common decisions. The decision-making process—the vote—becomes a means for rigidifying interdependency as entanglement.

Americans are by way of losing their independence. Individuals are becoming increasingly dependent upon government, and the dependence is becoming fixed. The states have lost much of their independence by changes in their relation to the federal government. Our national independence has been seriously compromised by both entangling alliances and by the belief that we should only act in foreign affairs in concert with other nations.

It is an attractive notion that Americans have been seduced into yielding up their independence, that they have been surreptitiously induced to sell their heritage for a mess of pottage, so to speak. It is not only attractive, but much evidence could be adduced in support of the notion. Undoubtedly, politicians have laid great emphasis upon the gains and downplayed the costs when they were advancing their programs. Undoubtedly, too, many intellectuals have drawn beautiful word pictures of the future their ideas would bring into being when put into effect. The thrust to socialism, by which so much of independence is being lost, has been ad-

vanced by every artifice known to man.

That, however, is a considerable distance from being the whole story. The Founders of the United States, who knew next to nothing about what we call socialism, would not have been surprised by the loss of independence by Americans. Many of them feared that the Republic they brought into being, the federal system they devised, and the rights they proclaimed would not last. They knew that constitutions are but pieces of paper unless men breathe life into and sustain them. They knew what we seem to have forgotten, that governments are derivative not originaive, and that republican governments derive their style and modes from the life of the people. When these have degenerated, the people will be "fit tools," as Jefferson put it, "for the designs of ambition," and rule will be by those who are most proficient in drawing up such designs.

### **Government Is Not Creative**

The late Ludwig von Mises concluded that government cannot create money. On the contrary, money comes into currency by the valuations people place on certain goods as money. Governments can adopt such currency; they can place their stamp upon it, but its value does not derive from government. They can, of course, debase it, coun-

terfeit it, and flood the market with simulacrums of it. In short, they can exploit it, but they cannot create it.

In like manner, personal independence, the independence of states, and national independence arise from the habits and spirit of a people. If they are not there government cannot create them. If they are there, representative governments have rough sledding in debasing them. In fact, representatives lack the incentive for attempting it.

My point is this. Americans, by and large, lost the habits and spirit of independence before they yielded it up by way of government action. As recently as 1914, say, the United States was following a resolute course of national independence. The states were still on their historic path of independence from the general government. (It should be noted, however, that the Seventeenth Amendment had just been ratified, providing for the direct election of Senators, thus removing some of a state's leverage in maintaining independence.) Nor had the populace become dependent upon government to any significant degree.

Nonetheless, increasing numbers of Americans were already developing habits of dependence. Millions of Americans were going into factory, mine, and mill for work. There they became dependent upon others to provide them with a job. Millions of

others had become or were becoming share croppers and tenant farmers. These depended upon the landlord for housing, land, and for much of the capital with which to operate. In the absence of coercion, they were free, but to the extent that they remained in these conditions they became acclimated to dependence.

### **Indebted and Dependent**

Living "on credit" became a way of life for many people. Farmers frequently borrowed against the forthcoming crop, not only for seed, fertilizer, and equipment but also for buying food and clothing. If the crop was not as large as anticipated, or if prices were lower, they would be unable to pay off the debt. Thus, they would go from year to year indebted and dependent upon the creditor. Wage-workers, too, often stayed in debt to storekeepers. "Easy terms" were becoming more generally available in the 1920s, and more and more people were availing themselves of the opportunity to "enjoy" new appliances and automobiles while they paid for them. Farmers borrowed from banks to buy farms, and many who got into straitened circumstances mortgaged their land and buildings to get money to operate. Businesses turned to credit for expansion. Indeed, by the late 1920s, an unprecedented number of people were trying to get rich on the basis of credit

by buying common stock "on margin."

Government did have a hand in this mounting dependence on credit. The Federal Reserve system fueled this credit binge by making easy money available on a large scale. (It was doing on a much broader scale what fractional reserve banking had been doing periodically for some time.) The habits of dependency were now widely formed and deeply ingrained.

The credit-fueled prosperity of the 1920s was like a house built upon sand. It could not stand when the storms of adversity came. The government gave, and the government took away. The Federal Reserve banks raised the rediscount rate and tightened the credit restrictions. A wave of selling hit the stock market, and as prices fell, more and more margin buyers had to sell. In the wake of the stock market crash in 1929, the house came tumbling down, so to speak.

Collectivist thought offered the solution that would be adopted. Habits of dependence prepared fertile soil in which collectivism could grow. In the 1930s, many people gladly availed themselves of one or more of the great array of programs which governments offered for aid and relief. Unionist collectivism made great strides as governments adopted policies promoting collectivist activity. Habits of dependence

were creased in the mold of permanence by the force which government intruded into the situation.

### **Stages of Dependency as Government Intrudes**

There has been a pattern to the yielding up and loss of independence in America. First came the development of habits of dependence. The spirit of independence, where it had been acquired, was not strong enough to resist the lure of the gains from dependence. In this first stage, to the extent that government played a role, it was usually remote and indirect.

The second stage is widespread dependence of people on government. This has taken hundreds of forms: a moratorium on mortgage payments, government guaranteed loans to business, government guaranteed loans for farmers and homeowners, crop subsidies, relief payments, privileges for collective action, social security, government decreed minimum wages, housing projects, school lunch programs, and so on, almost endlessly. Much of the dependence has become permanent, and living off government favors a way of life for many people.

The third stage is the loss of independence by the states. They have become increasingly dependent on the federal government. Many programs have been enacted by which Federal funds are made available

when states provide their portion of the funds. Highway building has become increasingly dependent upon Federal funds. Federal funds for schools have become an ever more important source of monies for these. So called revenue sharing by which Federal funds are parceled out to the states is one of the more recent of such activities. (Since the federal government has been operating with a deficit, it has had no excess revenue to share. It might better be called sharing in the proceeds of the mounting Federal debt.)

Though the states yield up much independence of action by participating in these programs, they have also lost much of their independence by Federal intrusion. The centralization of power in Washington has been accompanied by its decline in the states. By congressional enactments and court decisions uniform rules prevail in many areas throughout the United States. The states are losing much of their authority over city and local governments because there is so much direct Federal aid and control over them.

The independence of the states is important as an expression of local preferences and ways, the political reflex of an independent people. Its ultimate importance, however, is as a counterweight to the overweening power of the federal government. Power diffused is power contained

and limited, the necessary condition for the liberties of a people. The intermingling of Federal and state power is hardly distinguishable from its being concentrated in one government and unrestrained.

The fourth stage, the yielding of national independence, has been the result both of the general decline in the spirit of independence and of the thrust to collectivism. Since World War II, the United States has followed a course compromising and detrimental to national independence generally. By participating in the making of the United Nations Charter, joining the organization, and participating in its decisions and actions, the United States has committed itself, symbolically at least, to collective action. The United States has committed itself to a series of mutual security pacts which were nothing short of permanent alliances. These, and other international agreements, constitute entangling alliance. Many American leaders have come to expect that other nations will, or at least should, act with the United States against their own interests. The compromise of national independence has succeeded only thus far in proving that George Washington was right in his Farewell Address.

Whither independence in 1980, then? Much of it remains only in the memories of some of our older citi-

zens. By their dependence upon government many have surrendered their independence for the promise of security. State and Federal action has been so intertwined, Federal control so vastly expanded, and local governments so drawn into a dependence on the federal government that what remains of state independence takes on the appearance of relics. National independence has been compromised, hamstringing the nation in international affairs with little compensating augmenting of power.

We have neglected the sage advice of the Founders, and we are reaping the consequences. Ask not for whom the bell tolls, as the poet said, the bell is tolling for the passing of American independence.

### **Rekindling the Spirit**

I, for one, have no desire to attend a memorial service for American independence this Independence Day, 1980. The recalling of the signing of the Declaration of Independence can have but one useful purpose—to kindle anew the spirit of independence which gave rise to the events which we bring to mind. Better that the day should pass unnoticed, however, than that it be utilized simply for the call for some kind of political action. There is undoubtedly much political action needed to undo much of what has been done in the last half century or so. There was

much political activity which preceded and followed the signing of the Declaration of Independence.

But political activity from a people whose dependence has rendered them subservient would be little to the purpose. Republican government can hardly rise above its source in the people. It is the spirit of independence which produces independence. It is the habits of independence which maintain it. If we wait until the Federal Reserve system has been abolished to retire our personal debts, we will never be prepared to favor its abolition. If we wait to practice independent habits until the programs which foster our dependence are abolished, we could not endure it when it happened. When we have men who have resolutely trod the path of personal independence we shall have men who are worthy of political office, because they will be men, by and large, who do not want it. Then, we will have political action to the purpose.

### A Blessing in Disguise

IDEAS ON



LIBERTY

THE great truths of humanity do not spring newborn to each new generation. They emerge from long experience. They are the gathered wisdom of the ages. They are renewed in times of conflict and danger. In this sense, the current challenge to our political institutions may prove to be a kind of blessing in disguise. If the times in which we are now living do not bring a further understanding of the great traditions of our civilization and a deeper desire to affirm them, we are not worthy of our heritage.

Benjamin Franklin believed that personal independence was essential to individual morality. George Washington believed that national independence was essential to right action by nations. Thomas Jefferson believed that only those men who looked up to Heaven for their well-being would keep alive the love of liberty. Their vision of independence is surely worth recalling, and a day on which the spirit was rekindled would be worth celebrating. ☉

### —FOOTNOTES—

<sup>1</sup>Henry S. Commager, *Documents of American History*, vol. I (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1962, 7th ed.), p. 209.

<sup>2</sup>Quoted in Vernon L. Parrington, *The Colonial Mind* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1954), p. 353.

<sup>3</sup>Edwin H. Cady, ed., *Literature of the Early Republic* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1950), p. 311.

<sup>4</sup>Gerald N. Grob and Robert N. Beck, *American Ideas*, vol. I (New York: Free Press of Glencoe, 1963), p. 126.

E. SMYTHE GAMBRELL, "Our Principles of Freedom Must Stand"



# DEMOCRACY AND FREEDOM

A common error in political dialogue today is the interchangeable use of the words "democracy" and "freedom," as though they mean the same thing. They definitely do not; in fact, democracy can be a severe threat to freedom and individualism.

One of the most astute and intelligent observers of the American experiment with democracy was a Frenchman, Alexis de Tocqueville. His classic, *Democracy in America* was published in 1835, soon after his visit to America. The book is more pertinent today than when it was written. Tocqueville then theorized about the nature of democracy and its dangers to freedom, but these

theories have been proven correct, to a great extent, in the 20th Century.

Tocqueville recognized that aristocracy, monarchy, and such forms were quickly dying out in the West and that democracy was the wave of the future. The Old-World system of legalized privilege, which was inherited, and rule by the few, was being overthrown in favor of equality of opportunity and mass political control. Tocqueville stated very prophetically that, "The destiny of the world will be in the hands of America and of Russia; these two great nations, each going a different way, will determine what will happen."

Tocqueville further stated that "Democracy is irresistible, it is going to come." "Democracy has enormous benefits . . . but also

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