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AN ASSUMPTION OF FREEDOM

"As Mark Twain once said about America: 'it is a civilization which has destroyed the repose of life; replaced its contentments, its poetry, its soft romantic dreams and visions with the money fever, sordid ideals, vulgar ambitions, and the sleep which does not refresh.'"

~ART CRUMB

"We can have a democratic society or we can have a concentration of great wealth in the hands of the few. We cannot have both."

~ LOUIS BRANDEIS

July is a month celebrated as the birthday of the United States of America — in 2001 Yankee Doodle is 11score & 5 — and its founding principles of 'Liberty & Justice for All.'

The larger voices loudly proclaim the USA as the freest, most wonderful country on Earth and unfurl the flags of worldly preeminence and Godly jingoism. Smaller voices disagree: which is not to say the ideals of liberty and justice for all are not articulate in the nation or that their intent is less than political and personal freedom (and something akin to equality under the law however discriminatory its actual practice) for everybody now and in the future who live within its geospace.

The persistent conundrum is that the actuality is far less than advertised — that neither freedom nor equity is the daily reality for millions of Americans who are governed instead as if they live in a police state because they are poor or are of a minority race; that the old evils of worth measured by wealth, gender and race continually and perversely undercut the foundations the nation claims to stand upon and believe in.

The oldest struggle after survival is for freedom, of being part of a community, not enslaved by it — the eternal pitiless struggle between *haves* and *have nots*, the despairing rage of those condemned to live bitterly wretched lives in the shadows and as menials to the economic and politically powerful few who are in their turn angrily terrified by this rage.

History shrieks with the pain of injustice, only briefly muffled by excesses of gross brutality. Sometimes the oppressed overthrow the lords and bosses, but elites always rise in even the most originally classless societies. If the American Revolution is accepted as more than a revolt of colonial bourgeoisie and that it gave birth to an entirely egalitarian society in which the common citizenry had a chance to be their own rulers, it should also be realized that every reform has been bitterly and often bloodily resisted and only adopted with great reluctance. Reforms that have been ratified are usually countered with vicious backlash and unrelenting reversion.

Vernon Parrington believed that American history has been "largely a struggle between the spirit of the Declaration of Independence and the spirit of the Constitution, the one primarily concerned with the rights of man (*sic*), the other more practically concerned with the rights of property." He could not understand why intelligent Americans confused the two and thought of them as complimentary. "Their unlikeliness is unmistakable," he wrote in *Main Currents of American Thought*; "the one a classical statement of the French humanitarian democracy, the other an organic law designed to protect the minority under republican rule." Historians have long debunked his ideological division of the nation's two most important documents, yet as early as the 1820s Alexis de Tocqueville

observed, as R.R. Palmer wrote, "that 'equality' was one of the most fundamental ideas of the United States; but he also thought that the American Revolution had been of little importance in producing this spirit of equality." Or as Nicholas Chamfort put it, "Society is composed of two large classes; those who have more dinners than appetite, and those who have more appetite than dinners."

Those two classes form a single system, Henry Adams wrote, "...and that system is the price at which the proletariat is to be bought and sold, the bread and circuses." (George Bernard Shaw: "A government that robs Peter to pay Paul can always count on the support of Paul.")

The obsession for world power, which is America's self-proclaimed manifest destiny, has given it the myopic paradox of patriotic corruption. General Eisenhower said in his farewell speech as President forty years ago in 1961, "Every gun that is made, every warship launched, every rocket fired signifies in a final sense a theft from those who hunger and are not fed, those who are cold and not clothed."

Nationalism, a packaged product that disguises inequities and rot within a nation while simultaneously promoting the imperial ambitions of a powerful and avaricious minority, is a prerequisite for expansion (primarily economic colonialism in this new millennium); and ideologies, which are fictions, are yet justifications for tyrannies and terrorisms large and small.

The greater cost is the ultimate loss of liberties in the holy names of national defense and national security. Government hides its clandestine acts against foreign nations and its own citizens under official secrets classifications which deny access to the citizenry. Operating away from public scrutiny and on behalf of the narrow interests of the elite few, the government cloaks its corruption with pieties of patriotism and the blessings of God. Our cultural pashas proselytize our obviously superior and enlightened supremacy to a wary and suspicious world while subverting opposition at home to our post-Cold War mode of *Pax Romana*. "War is the enemy of democracy," Howard Zinn says unequivocally. He might add that militarism leads both to war and domestic subordination and is as much the nemesis of freedom.

The assumption of freedom is that the average human being is intelligent and inspired by compassion and that most people will think and act reasonably most of the time. The usual assumption of government is the common citizenry is unintelligent, primitive and brutal and must be shielded from its own perfidious nature. The tendency of government is to rule and it is a parasite. Government must by the implication or force of its sovereignty feed upon and subtract the political liberties, rights and powers of those it rules. It is the responsibility of the people to always contain the power of their government, which without that restraint will relentlessly take away power from the people. In the past century the U.S. government has usurped much power for itself, some of it for the betterment of the people such as civil rights laws, but also much of it against the people such as the rule of terror, secrecy and doubt that characterized the Cold War and nuclear arms race with the now defunct Soviet Union.

The idea of the authority of law is a recognition by most of us that a few of us will cheat, rob, murder and otherwise make life uncomfortable for the rest. A majority desires protection from the psychopathy of an avaricious minority. For exactly the same

purpose, to protect us from predatory or cruel government, the political freedom and power of the common citizenry has been made the law of this nation. Yet a government of the people is assumed to also be a government for the people, so it is entrusted to act in the people's behalf to prevent or correct the excesses of monopolistic and unprincipled private interests, which is in contrast to the current era of virulent capitalism.

Former President Reagan was wrong when he said that a free government must be free from government. The dismantling of government protections which has accelerated since his administration alters government's role from acting as benefactor and protector of civil rights and liberties to its more ominous nature of guardian and enforcer of the reigning status quo, which is increasingly articulated by the wealthy elite and the religious right.

Freedom implies a mature citizenry while the nature of authority requires that no one grow up. To be free and remain that way is a large responsibility and many people don't want it. Political freedom insists upon the value of the individual but the accelerated complexity of American society is constructed on aggregates and consensus and makes the contributions and usefulness of each of us less valuable. Our thinking and sense of self-worth are critically affected. An individual and ultimately collective sense of personal and political helplessness settles in.

Our freedoms seem to be only wishful lies, bedtime tales told by those we democratically select to alkalize our minds of thought or responsibility. Reality is treated as event which translates into what entertains. Almost everyone seems apprehensive of the period we are trying to live through, and of this new century we step warily into, an unscripted frontier without horizons. Zestful prophecies of *humanity uber alles* are proclaimed, as are apocalyptic visions. The law of parsimony is not helpful: the simplest answer is probably the wrong one. (If God is dead who is there but *Homo Jones* to believe in, the great 19th century idea that made the 20th century a malestrom of hubris and horror?)

"From top to bottom the whole system is a fraud," Henry Adams wrote. "All of us know it, laborers and capitalists alike, and all of us are consenting parties to it." He thought the entire society would "go to wrack if we really lay hands of reform on our rotten institutions." Forest Amsden, former news director of KGW-TV in Portland (he died in 1990) wrote that "the federal and legislative branches" of the U.S. government "are so corrupt that reform requires insurrection."

James Madison argued 210 years ago in 1791 when he introduced the Bill of Rights to the Constitution as its first ten amendments that "the people, not the government, possess the absolute sovereignty."

Abraham Lincoln said that if the people retain their virtue and vigilance, no administration, "by any extreme of wickedness or folly," can very seriously injure the governmental concepts of our founding ancestors.

If we wish to take hope and some encouragement in the long struggle ahead to right the balance of power in this country, perhaps it is not too late to agree with James Boyle, who wrote in the *New York Times*, "One reason we have a democracy is because people make unspeakably stupid decisions without it."

~MICHAEL PAUL McCUSKER