

# Acknowledgments

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# Introduction: The American Crisis

*“THESE are the times that try men’s souls. The summer soldier and the sunshine patriot will, in this crisis, shrink from the service of their country; but he that stands it now, deserves the love and thanks of man and woman.”*

– Thomas Paine (1776)<sup>1</sup>

America finds itself in a time of crisis. For several generations we have expressed dissatisfaction with government, be it with the Viet Nam war, the energy and economic crises of the 1970’s, the scandals of the 1980’s and 1990’s, or the present war in Iraq. While there is a case to be made that a little dissatisfaction with the status quo is healthy, it has gone far beyond that now. For anyone remotely in touch with the state of our republic, there is a growing sense of dread that whatever is wrong is getting much worse much faster. They realize that what was once a desire for change has now become a dire *need* for change. Yet, in as much as the voting public clamors for it, does anyone think for a moment that the majority of people in America actually know what changes are necessary, or even what changes they want?

The United States emerged from the 19<sup>th</sup> century amidst the most in-

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1 Paine, Thomas The American Crisis “The Crisis No. 1” December 19, 1776 from *Paine Collected Writings* edited by Eric Foner Literary Classics of the United States, Inc. New York, NY 1955 pg. 91

novative period in the history of mankind. The industrial revolution had wrought miracles that could barely have been imagined 100 years before. After thousands of years of traveling on foot or on the backs of beasts of burden, automobiles carried Americans wherever they wished to go. Steamships freed travel by sea from the vagaries of the four winds, and the telegraph and telephone made communication with distant locations instantaneous, when just a few decades earlier weeks or even months might be required for a single letter to arrive. Electric light replaced the gas lamps of yesteryear, and man's most ancient dream was realized by Wilbur and Orville Wright.

With the explosion of technology came an explosion of wealth and prosperity. Mass production and other improvements in manufacturing made production of goods far cheaper and faster, increasing availability beyond the affluent to the common man. Indeed, as significant as the fortunes that were made by famous captains of industry was the increase in the standard of living of the growing middle class, and even of the poor. For the first time in history, the common people were the prime market for the output of society's production. After thousands of years to the contrary, children no longer had to toil with their parents just to ensure that the family had enough to eat. The average American lived comfortably on the income produced by one member of the family, and that family's standard of living was constantly improving. No challenge seemed too formidable for a people that had harnessed the power of lightning, conquered the air, and had seemingly made a servant of Mother Nature herself. Finally, the end of poverty and want were in sight.

At the dawn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, no such optimism prevailed. The technology-fueled prosperity of the 1990's had hit a serious stumbling block with the crash of the NASDAQ index, and a recession was just getting underway when America welcomed a new president. In the

# Chapter 1

## What is Freedom?

*“And what is this liberty, whose very name makes the heart beat faster and shakes the world?”*

– Frederic Bastiat<sup>1</sup> (1850)

If there is one thing that is uniquely associated with America, it is freedom. From the moment that Cornwallis surrendered to Washington at Yorktown, America has been a symbol of liberty to the entire world. Since the end of World War II, when the United States assumed a worldwide leadership role, it has been the leader of the “free world.” At sporting events, standing crowds begin their ovation when the vocalist singing the national anthem gets to the words, “O’er the land of the free.” Even in everyday conversations, scarcely a day goes by that one does not hear someone say, “Do what you like, it’s a free country.” Come what may, the overwhelming majority of Americans are grateful that they live in America, the land of the free.

However, although we all agree that America is the “land of the free,” the next question may be a bit more difficult to answer. What is freedom? How is it defined? What makes America the land of the free? How would we know if we were to lose our freedom? What is it that our soldiers die for, and our politicians swear to defend?

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<sup>1</sup> Bastiat, Frederic *The Law* 1850 from *The Bastiat Collection 2 Volumes Vol. 1* Ludwig Von Mises Institute Auburn, AL 2007 pg. 79

We have been told a lot of things about what freedom is not. From the end of World War II until 1991, most Americans knew that freedom was not communism. For almost three generations, Americans lived in the “free world” during its cold war with the communist eastern bloc. Without further thought or instruction, it is not surprising that many children of the 20<sup>th</sup> century simply think of freedom as the antithesis of communism. In some ways, this is not completely untrue, although it hardly provides a complete answer to our question. In any case, what we do know about the communist regimes of the 20<sup>th</sup> century is enough for us to conclude that they were definitely not free societies.

Of course, that certainly does not mean that all systems of government besides communism provide freedom for their people. Our own country fought for its freedom against the monarch George III of England, whom the American colonists accused of tyranny. Likewise, the Royal House of Saud may be an ally of the U.S. government, but most Americans would not regard Saudi Arabia as a “free country.” In addition to monarchies, there are plenty of dictatorships around the world that are symbols of oppression. While some may likewise be allies of the U.S. government, they nevertheless represent an absence of freedom for their people. So, a society is not free merely because it is not communist.

On the other hand, Great Britain has been a relatively free country for its people throughout much of its history over the past several centuries, even when the monarchy was much more than a figurehead. Despite the dispute between George III and the American colonies, Great Britain was at that time the freest society in the world, and with the exception of the United States remained so for some time afterwards. Therefore, rather than conclude that no freedom is possible under a monarchy, we might conclude that monarchies neither guarantee nor necessarily exclude freedom, while dictatorships for the most part exclude it. Still, examining these systems of government, at least superficially, does not get us any closer to defining freedom.

Perhaps we can define freedom more easily by looking at its antithesis. Merriam-Webster Dictionary lists slavery among antonyms for freedom. Surely, here we have found a start. Most people would agree that slavery is the complete absence of freedom. Who can we imagine that is less free than the slave? This is helpful in beginning to try to frame an answer. However, freedom cannot be the mere absence of slavery. Surely our founding fathers bled to give us a higher standard than this!

If we are told anything about what freedom is by our teachers, politicians, or media, it is that freedom is democracy. If you ask most Americans what freedom is, this is the most likely answer that you will get. This is reinforced ad nauseum by our politicians, media, and in our public schools. When Iraq held its first elections after the overthrow of Saddam Hussein, politicians and journalists universally celebrated the Iraqis' "first taste of freedom."

Certainly, democracy is a vast improvement over the autocratic rule of a dictator, but does democracy automatically mean freedom? If democracy is rule by the majority, what about the minority? What if 51 % of the people voted to oppress the other 49%? Would that society truly be free?

Most Americans would be quite surprised to learn what our founding fathers thought about democracy. Any objective analysis would conclude that their feelings about democracy lay somewhere between suspicion and contempt. While he often extolled the virtue of majority rule, as long as it continued to protect natural rights, Thomas Jefferson also wrote,

"...that the majority, oppressing an individual, is guilty of a crime, abuses its strength, and by acting on the law of the strongest breaks up the foundations of society."<sup>2</sup>

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2 Jefferson, Thomas *To Dupont de Nemours* from *Jefferson Writings* edited by Merrill D. Peterson New York, NY: Literary Classics of the United States, 1984 pg. 1387

James Madison said, “Democracy is the most vile form of government ... democracies have ever been spectacles of turbulence and contention: have ever been found incompatible with personal security or the rights of property: and have in general been as short in their lives as they have been violent in their deaths,”<sup>3</sup>

In a letter to James Monroe, Madison also said,

“There is no maxim, in my opinion, which is more liable to be misapplied, and which, therefore, more needs elucidation, than the current one, that the interest of the majority is the political standard of right and wrong.”<sup>4</sup>

Can this be true? The founding fathers were ambivalent toward democracy? For many people, this is tantamount to sacrilege. More shocking still is what the Declaration of Independence and the U.S. Constitution say about democracy – nothing. Nowhere in our founding documents will you find the word democracy or the assertion, either implicit or explicit, that our government is a democracy. How can this be?

Despite what we are taught almost from birth, the United States of America has never been a democracy. As only contrarians seem to point out these days, the United States of America is a constitutional republic. We choose our leaders using the democratic process of majority vote, but that is the extent to which the United States involves itself with democracy.

So, like monarchy, democracy neither guarantees nor necessarily excludes freedom. In fact, our founding fathers actually feared that democracy poses a great danger to freedom. Apart from the pure heresy of the idea, it leaves us with an even greater problem. We are no closer

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3 Madison, James *Federalist #10* <http://www.foundingfathers.info/federalistpapers/fedi.htm> <http://www.foundingfathers.info/federalistpapers/fed10.htm>

4 Madison, James *Letter to James Monroe* October 5th, 1786 James Madison Center, The <http://www.jmu.edu/madison/center/home.htm> Phillip Bigler, Director, James Madison University Harrisonburg, VA [http://www.jmu.edu/madison/center/main\\_pages/madison\\_archives/quotes/supremacy.htm](http://www.jmu.edu/madison/center/main_pages/madison_archives/quotes/supremacy.htm)

to defining freedom. If even democracy is not freedom, then perhaps freedom doesn't really exist! If we are not to find freedom in democracy, where else can we look?

We certainly won't learn what freedom is from our politicians. While terrorism, healthcare, unemployment, gay marriage, and a host of other "major" issues dominate public debate, freedom is an issue that is just too quaint, too academic, or too forgotten to get any airplay. Yet, as we shall see as we explore the different subjects of this book, freedom is THE fundamental issue. In fact, despite what we perceive as a myriad of different problems facing the United States of America today, freedom is actually the *only* issue. That may be hard to accept at this point, given the decades of shoddy history, obfuscation, and plain old bad ideas that we've been bombarded with. Nevertheless, no matter what specific issue we confront in this book, every one of them actually revolves around freedom. Therefore, if freedom is really that important, if our soldiers are truly *dying* for our freedom, we'd better be absolutely sure that we know what it is.

In order to answer the question posed by Bastiat at the beginning of this chapter, we will have to go back to the beginning. Our founding fathers faced no such quandary about the definition of freedom; they knew *exactly* what it was. They were children of the Age of Reason, and derived their ideas about freedom directly from the enlightenment philosophers, especially John Locke. While these philosophers were powerful thinkers and their ideas were (no pun intended) revolutionary at the time, the principles of liberty are relatively simple. They are, as the namesake of this book concluded, Common Sense. In fact, it was an understanding of these revolutionary ideas by average American colonists that inspired the revolution that gave birth to a nation.

The idea that opens the door to the true meaning of freedom is *individual* rights. Despite the emphasis in today's discourse placed upon the

“general welfare” and the “common good,” the tradition of liberty that our country was founded upon had nothing to do with either. Instead, our founders believed that each individual was born with natural, unalienable rights. The Declaration of Independence states,

“We hold these truths to be self evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights,”<sup>5</sup>

This passage is quoted widely in popular culture. Invariably, the words that are emphasized are “that all men are created equal.” Certainly, these are fine words, and worthy of veneration. However, the rest of this passage is equally important. It says that all men “are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights.” Thus, every human being, having been created in a state of equality with all other human beings, has rights that no earthly power can take away. These rights are “endowed by their Creator,” so that government – even a democratically elected government – has no power to revoke them. To the founding fathers this was “self evident.” It was true based purely upon man’s existence itself.

This idea is drawn directly from the philosophy of John Locke, who wrote,

“A state also of equality, wherein all the power and jurisdiction is reciprocal, no one having more than another; there being nothing more evident, than that creatures of the same species and rank, promiscuously born to all the same advantages of nature, and the use of the same faculties, should also be equal one amongst another without subordination or subjection,”<sup>6</sup>

While the rights alluded to are “endowed by their Creator,” it is im-

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5 Declaration of Independence, United States 1776 National Archives and Records (website) [http://www.archives.gov/exhibits/charters/declaration\\_transcript.html](http://www.archives.gov/exhibits/charters/declaration_transcript.html)

6 John Locke *Second Treatise on Civil Government* from *Two Treatises of Government C.* and J. Rivington, 1824 (Harvard University Library Copy) pg. 132

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