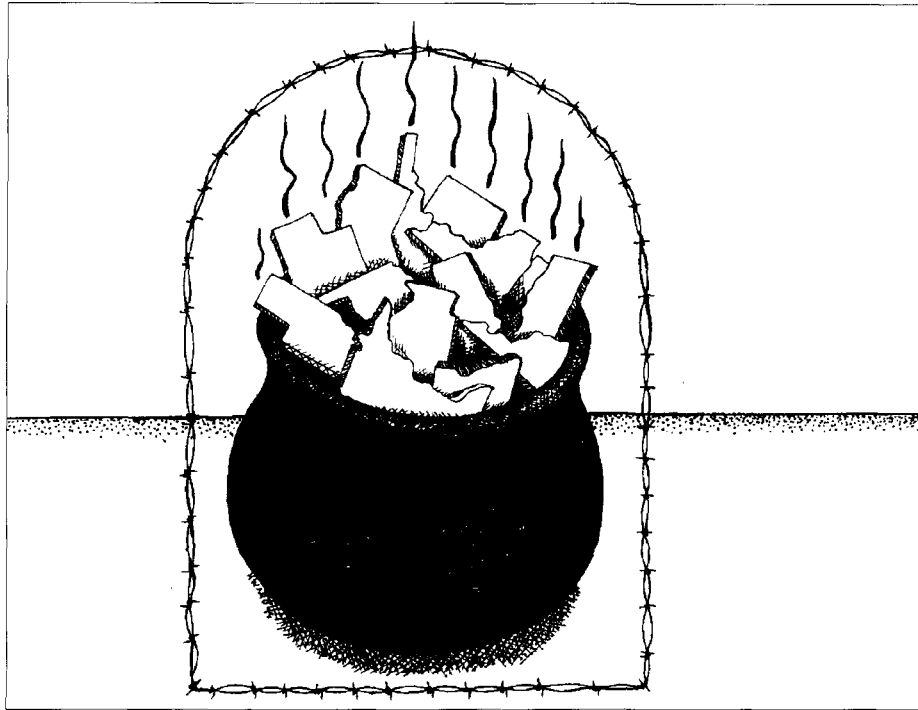


Sweet Land of Liberty

by Murray N. Rothbard



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I am deeply honored to receive the Richard Weaver Award, to stand in the ranks of the distinguished men who have received it, and to have an award in the name of a man who has always been one of my heroes. As a lifelong libertarian, I have been moved by the occasion to reflect on one of the most important questions of our time: What exactly is the relationship between the principles of liberty, the “abstract” principles if you will, and the undeniable fact that they were instantiated most fully and gloriously in the Old Republic, in the United States of America, in the old patriotic hymn the “sweet land of liberty,” at least until recent decades?

Free-market economists generally focus on the point, which I believe undeniable, that a free-market economy, and its necessary underpinnings, the secure rights of private property, will vivify any culture, any civilization. The people of any country will be immeasurably better off to the extent that they enjoy a free market and its blessings. One of the most inspiring works by my favorite “development economist,” Lord Peter Bauer, was his first book, *West African Trade*, which demonstrated in detail that the back country jungles of Nigeria and what is now Ghana prospered from a vast network of market exchanges along the jungle trails, markets which were largely unknown by the British officials luxuriating in the capital city or by their African Marxist successors. To the extent that these rural mar-

kets were known, of course, they were crippled by taxes and government controls.

Conceding this point, what interests me here is the opposite question: What was there about America that led to the widest and deepest example in history of secure property rights, liberty, and freedom of enterprise? Part of the answer was supplied in the excellent little book by the French economic historian Jean Baechler, *The Origins of Capitalism*. Baechler locates the origins of the highly and uniquely developed market economy in Western Europe in two interrelated facts from early centuries of the Christian era: first, the policies were so remarkably decentralized that there were literally hundreds of small sovereign states or quasi-states instead of one mighty empire; and second, for the first time in world history, there was no state-run Church; in other words, the Christian Church was transnational and therefore could and did function as a mighty check upon state power. As a result of these lucky or providential circumstances, an international market could develop, and private individuals and groups could flourish more or less free of state power and depredations. I would add another important point: that Christianity is the only religion that I know of that is individualist rather than collectivist, whose focus is *not* the tribe or the city-state or some universal pantheistic blob, but the person and his salvation, not only a person made in God’s image, but one in whom God Himself had become incarnate.

So the first reason America became the sweet land of liberty is that its heritage was Western European, the creation of those current villains, dead white European males. But what led

Murray N. Rothbard (1926-1995) received the Ingersoll Foundation’s 1994 Richard M. Weaver Award for Scholarly Letters, for which this was his acceptance speech.

America to surpass the liberties of the Old World?

As if this question were not broad enough to tackle, I would also like to reflect this afternoon on an interrelated question: What made America into a nation? And what is a “nation,” anyway? It seems clear to me that a country or a nation can be held together *either* by a dynastic empire, such as the Habsburgs; by ethnic ties, such as we are seeing in the new nations of Europe and western Asia; by some overarching idea or ideology, such as communism (although the Soviet Union was also in many ways a cover for imperial domination by Russia over other nationalities); or by some unique blend of the last two, which I hope to show was the case in the United States.

We start our treatment of these cosmically broad questions by harking back to what is supposed to be an old discredited myth: that North America, despite the Indians, was basically an empty continent. Compared with densely populated Western Europe, North America was a rich and empty land, full of great resources, ready to be settled. Being relatively empty, the land was peopled by various groups of settlers, each of whom could do in the New World what they could never do in the Old: set up their own cherished institutions without rubbing up against each other.

It is a cliché that America is uniquely a nation of immigrants, and from this supposed fact, the intellectual and media elites, from left-liberal to left-libertarian to neoconservative, go on to celebrate the multicultural melting pot or mosaic of America. Moreover, these same elites are using this alleged tradition to stimulate an ingathering of one and all, thereby turning America into what Ben Wattenberg calls the “first universal nation.” There are several grave problems with this disastrous oxymoron. The whole point of a nation is that it *cannot* be “universal.” To have a country or a nation at all, there must be close ties of shared customs and traditions, values, principles, and institutions. These ties cannot be imposed externally and suddenly by fiat, or by a handful of bureaucrats or ideologues. They must grow, “organically” as it were, over the centuries, from within or from below among the people. In almost all cases, the foundation of these ties is a shared ethnicity, which inspires and cements the common customs, principles, and institutions. That is why the collapse by the end of World War I of multinational dynasties such as the Austro-Hungarian Empire, and the recent glorious crumbling of the imperial, ideological, multinational Soviet Union, have allowed ethnic nations, or nation-states, to come powerfully to the fore.

If there are no such shared ethnic and cultural bonds within a country, then the “country” cannot be a nation at all: it can only be a congeries of clashing peoples and groups, held together by the coercive force of the state apparatus, which grows and swells in its attempt to try to hold the collapsing entity together. The state apparatus, of course, does not mind this process at all, since under the cover of a grotesquely warped form of “patriotism,” it can maximize its own power at the expense of persons, families, communities, and local governments, which may be the point of the whole exercise. Tragically, this is precisely what has been happening to our beloved country, our once vibrant and now dying nation, America.

Let us look more closely at the slogan that “we are a nation of immigrants.” It may be true enough, but it misses the point: *every* nation on the face of the earth, after all, was originally settled by immigrants. The difference is that these other nations of immigrants were by and large ethnically homogeneous, and each of them—Welsh, Serbs, Tajiks, or Uzbeks—has more or

less settled into its own territory, if not always its own nation-state. Of course, there were many admixtures, many places where, for various reasons, no one ethnic group was preponderant. But America needs to realize that it is precisely those areas—whether Bosnia, or Afghanistan, or Northern Ireland—where bloody conflict seems to be unrelenting and eternal. The idea of the peaceful coexistence of ethnic groups within a country is a chimera, an absurd and impossible dream that turns rapidly into a nightmare. National and ethnic separation, each group with its own nation or country, seems to be the only workable solution.

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mean nowadays,
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And here we need to point out that a shared religion is, in virtually every case, a necessary part of ethnicity. This truth offends modern liberal ideologues, left and right, who like to think of religion as uniquely personal to each individual. In fact, a religion is always a community, a community of specific creeds, liturgies, and buildings. It is a community of ideas and practices that parents pass on to their children.

But does this not contradict one of my first points: that a crucial reason for the freedom, the economic prosperity, and the glorious civilization of Western Europe was that the state did not dominate and cripple the Church, that the Christian Church, at least before the Reformation, was transnational? Not at all, for the same Christian or Catholic Church, even when all services were in Latin, took a different cultural form in each country. There was no mistaking the differences, for example, between Italian and Irish Catholicism. Furthermore, because the Church was transnational, it could not be dominated by the state, whose power over civil society was kept within strict limits.

How did America forge a new nation out of these diverse groups of immigrants? The answer is worked out in *Albion's Seed*, in which David Hackett Fischer demonstrates that the *founding* immigrant groups in America, virtually all the immigrants in the first two of the four centuries of American life, came from the British Isles. It is true that these immigrant groups came from different regions of Britain, and that they settled homogeneously in different regions. Essentially, there were three groups: *Puritans*, who came mainly from East Anglia and settled in close-knit townships in New England; *Cavaliers*,

who came from Wessex in southern England, and settled on large plantations in the tidewater South; and, in the 18th century, large numbers of *Scotch-Irish*, who came from the fierce and warring border country in northern England, southern Scotland, and northern Ireland, who settled as individualistic farmers in the back country of Southern and Middle Atlantic America.

Each of these groups had very different values, mores, institutions, and temperaments, and they often clashed when brought together. They were all British and almost all Protestants, although even their Protestantism varied markedly, but they were still all British, and all were Christians. Hence, despite their numerous differences, they were able to forge a new nation in opposition to the British attempt to reimpose an empire upon the colonies, which had been allowed, for various reasons, to acquire *de facto* independence. The Americans could form a new nation because the conditions for a single nation existed: a common language, a common ethnicity, a common British heritage, and even a common religion. The inherited British principles were essentially libertarian, stressing limited government, parliamentary institutions, local liberties, freedom of speech and assembly, free markets, and the rights of private property.

In creating the new nation, the Founding Fathers did a truly remarkable job, performed an extraordinarily difficult task phenomenally well. If you want to get depressed, consider the men who forged first the new state governments with their written constitutions binding down government, then the Articles of Confederation, and finally the Constitution. Even focusing on those men whom I like the least, such as Alexander Hamilton, simply compare them to their counterparts today, the Bushes, Rostenkowskis, and Clintons! Surely there is no need to belabor the horrific contrast.

What the Founding Fathers did, then, in casting off the chains binding us to the British Empire, was to use their deep and broad insights into the history of nations, build on such British examples as Magna Carta and the Declaration of Rights, and create a uniquely decentralized polity of separate and sovereign states each delegating strictly limited powers to a federal government. Each of the state governments, as well as the federal government, had its power chained down by constitutions and bills of rights, insuring that power remained in the hands of the people themselves. Any government power was to be kept on the local level, as close to the people as possible, and the only function of government was to secure the property rights of the governed. Not the least, of course, the rights of the people against the government itself.

What about the famed “separation of church and state,” a phrase which never appears in the founding documents? The point of this idea was not the absurd and fanatically secularist notion of insuring at all costs that there be no prayer in the public schools; indeed, only the New England Puritans and Unitarians were interested in having any public schools at all. What the Founding Fathers realized is that any overarching big government is apt to impose a state church and thereby transcend the vital religious checks and limits on state power—as the Byzantine Empire and later Czarist Russia were able to do with the Orthodox Church in Eastern Europe. And even though there was no longer a single Christian church as there had been in pre-Reformation Europe, there were many Protestant sects in America, and the Founding Fathers were anxious to ensure that the federal government never established one of them to

be the official State Church of America. Hence, the First Amendment, which of course was supposed to apply only to the federal government, and which wedded religious liberty to the absence of such an established Church. It is instructive to note, by the way, that a few of the states continued to have an established Church after the adoption of the Constitution, such as the Congregational Church in Connecticut, without being denounced by the libertarians of that day and without America falling apart.

Until the end of the 18th century, immigration into America was homogeneous, so that free institutions of the country, as well as its stated libertarian principles, were solidly grounded in a shared British tradition of language, customs, values, ideals, and religion. Then, as David Hackett Fischer points out, when non-British immigrants began to pour in during the 19th century, largely from Ireland, Germany, and Scandinavia, these nationalities could and did adapt themselves to those British customs and institutions: not just to the English language, which was critical, but also to the values, principles, and institutions as stated in the founding American documents as well as to the unstated but equally important traditions inherited from Britain. This assimilation process worked astoundingly well. Even when non-British groups poured in from other parts of Europe in large numbers, and even when there was friction and resistance, especially in the shock to Protestants of Catholic immigration, the adaptation process worked with remarkable speed and thoroughness. Even when larger numbers arrived in what was termed the “new immigration” from Eastern and Southern Europe at the close of the 19th century, the process continued to work well.

I remember our family physician telling me about his first trip to London, about how much it meant to him to see the Houses of Parliament, what he referred to as “our heritage.” Even though his personal ancestry was far from Britain and his parents were immigrants from Eastern Europe, he said this in absolute sincerity and without a trace of irony. As for my own immigrant father and myself, he and we had become “Americans” in our heart and soul, and of course Britain and its traditions and institutions were the foundation of America’s and therefore of “our” heritage.

We used to talk about what it meant to be “an American.” We used to say these words proudly, and they had a deep meaning. But the very concept of being “an American” has been lost. What does “American” *mean* nowadays, except to be born on American territory, to be entitled to welfare benefits, or to be subject to American taxes? Think, for example, of the response should some foolhardy congressman now propose the reestablishment of a House Committee on Un-American Activities. Hysteria would pour in on him from all the pundits and media elites, and he would be instantly denounced as racist, sexist, xenophobic, homophobic, fascist, and any other smear epithet that might be ready at hand. But the problem lies deeper: Who would even know what he was talking about? How could we possibly know what the word “un-American” meant if we have even lost the knowledge of what an “American” is supposed to be?

When my father came to this country in 1910, he knew not a word of English and had no money. All he had was the burning determination to “become an American.” What that meant for him was not unusual at the time, although he perhaps pursued the goal with more consistency than many of his

fellows. He was determined, in the first place, not only to learn English, but to abandon his Old World culture and read only this new language. He was in that way able to purge himself of any foreign accent. Although he arrived penniless, he worked his way through a private college, paying tuition with never a thought about seeking government handouts. That idea was anathema to all of this generation. He then became a chemist and a successful corporate executive. Never did he succumb to modern victimology; he would have considered such whining as reprehensible, evil, indeed “un-American.”


Being “an American,” then, meant to my father, and to most other Americans of his and earlier generations, being committed to certain core principles: respect for private property, hard work, thrift, freedom of enterprise, and a government that was strictly limited, confined basically to keeping criminals in line. These ideas of Americanism were not, of course, worked out systematically or in the trappings of high political theory, either by my father or by most Americans. They were ingrained, core, fundamental beliefs, beliefs deep in their bones.

This lack of a systematic theoretical conception of Americanism was both a strength and a weakness. It was a strength precisely because it was habitual, instinctive, deeply rooted.

But it was a weakness because it left the American public open to attack in recent times by cunning and sophisticated intellectuals who, “subversive” in the deepest and truest sense, are able to challenge and to undermine this structure of beliefs and practices that had wrought our beloved America.

For this marvelous “Americanism,” these ideas and customs and their instantiated institutions and practices, brought about the Old Republic, the sweet land of liberty that we knew and loved, the freest, the most prosperous, the most glorious nation on earth, the nation whose passing we mourn today. When we sang the old patriotic hymns, we meant every word, even when, as in the case of my family physician, this fervor might seem misplaced to a cynic. Yes, even when we sang

Land where my fathers died,
Land of the pilgrim’s pride.

“Freedom’s holy light” may be dimming, along with what it means to be “an American,” but so long as we can recover and celebrate the memory of America’s glory and how it came into being, we can live in hope that some day it will shine brightly once again. 

The O.J. Simpson Trial

by Gail White

If you’re reading this in fifty years, or a hundred,
you won’t know what I’m talking about. You’ve forgotten
who O.J. Simpson was, just as you’ve forgotten
those other atrocities of the 20th century:
Fatty Arbuckle raping a starlet with a lump of ice,
Ruth Snyder bashing her husband’s skull with a sash weight—
There was a trial for you! In ’29
The papers couldn’t get enough of it. Judd Gray,
the hapless corset salesman, Ruth Snyder’s lover,
gave evidence that hanged her higher than Haman—
how she was the vampire spider to his fly,
the mastermind of the sash weight. He was as limp
as cooked spaghetti in her hands. He told the truth
at last, and like twin eggs they fried in the chair.

That’s trivia now, and time will trivialize
the Zodiac Killer and Kennedy’s assassin,
Charlie Manson, Richard Speck and the nurses,
Jeffrey Dahmer and his kettle of simmering hearts.
The old sage lied who said you could gain immortal
fame by killing the greatest man of your time.
What lesson here? The old one of earthly vanity—
how the memory of every atrocity fades with time,
and but for Euripides we’d have long forgotten
Medea and the banality of her murders.