

THE SPIRIT OF AMERICAN LIBERTY: PRINCIPLES AND PRACTICE

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27 March 2009

Atlas Foundation

New Orleans, Louisiana

Ladies and gentlemen, the topic of our discussion today could not be more timely. Indeed, I believe this is a crucial period in the history of our civilization. For it faces three formidable threats, and I am not sure it possesses the moral reserves to defeat them. The threats are: (1) the surging centralization and nationalization of the world economy, along with the crushing debt and assault on productivity that that entails; (2) anti-Western imperialism, which is growing both in numbers and in virulence; and (3) the thought-control that has been spreading like a cancer throughout higher education and from there to other parts of our civilization. These threats are not unconnected, but I believe that if they grow and spread unopposed—or if opposed only with trepidation and uncertainty—they may be the causes to which historians of future ages will point and declare the beginning of the decline and fall of the American civilization.

I am not a pessimistic person by nature. But I believe that what we are seeing is not merely the leftward–rightward swing of the political pendulum or the natural nostalgia people get as they grow older for mythical Golden Ages gone by. For over two centuries America has stood as the representative to the world of a worldview that is exceedingly rare in human history. That American worldview, which is what I call the “spirit of American liberty,” is not a philosophical position in the systematic or analytic sense of the term. It is, rather, a conception of human virtue and dignity that has informed both the institutions and the spirit that has characterized the best of America and Americans. It centers on the virtue of personal independence as the essence of human dignity. From that single virtue—*independence*—flow all the other virtues for which America has stood: limited government, private property, free trade and free exchange and free association, private and personal charity, the general ethic of “live and let live.” In her short history America became the greatest place on earth to live, because the opportunity here was that one could be one’s own person, and stand or fall on one’s own individual initiative, without having to beg for personal favors, without having to grovel at the knees of a king or flatter a lord or otherwise degrade oneself with obsequious deference. Here, in America, you stand, on your feet, not your knees; and you have the liberty to go where your own abilities and initiative—not someone else’s condescension—can take you. With that freedom, however, comes, as most Americans at one time understood, responsibility for your actions. If you succeed, you reap the benefits, and no one begrudges you your success because it means you have done well both for yourself and for others; on the other hand, if you fail, you pay the cost, and you learn not to do that again.

Let me pause for a moment on the crucial importance of that last point. Contrary to widespread opinion, failure is not something that public policy should attempt to eliminate. Indeed, failure, and the experiencing of the bad consequences attendant on having made decisions that led to failure, is an indispensable part of the spirit of American liberty—as well as a key to its astonishing success. You are not fully human if you have never failed and borne the full brunt of the consequences of your failure. For this is the only way people can develop independent judgment: by experiencing the good results and positive feedback of choosing well, and by experiencing the bad results and negative feedback of choosing poorly. The alternative—preventing people from experiencing the consequences of their actions—may lead to less pain, at least in the short run, but it buys that at the price of robbing people of an integral aspect of their humanity. Developing and exercising judgment is something unique to human beings, and if you prevent people from using their judgment by insulating them from the consequences of their decisions, you degrade them to subhuman status. They may be alive, but they are not living like human beings.

Do you know Rilke's poem "The Panther"? It tells of the powerful and beautiful panther who, once free, now sees the world from behind bars, indeed a thousand bars. In time the panther's beauty and power wane—not because of age, but because his spirit is caged and thus defeated. Sooner than one could expect the panther is, though alive, truly dead, because behind the bars he is no longer a panther. Now one might say, as perhaps his well-intended zoo keepers do say, that in the wild his life is full of dangers; nature can sometimes be parsimonious and dangerous, whereas the zoo keepers are benevolent and protective. But the pampered and protected panther is still a caged panther, and thus not really a panther at all.

The spirit of American liberty is the spirit not of zoo keepers but of panthers. Living free is uncertain and sometimes dangerous, and it involves both success and failure. But both one's successes and one's failures are one's own. They belong to you and to me, and it is, I submit, the true dignity of humanity to fully exercise all its abilities in contending and striving. Human beings become beautiful by the vigorous use of all their faculties, and they become dignified when their lives are their own, when all the forced care and protection of others is taken away and the bars are thrown open.

Now, it must be admitted that having another take care of us can be seductively appealing. That is why socialism can gain ground—and, indeed, why it has gained ground almost everywhere and now, right now, threatens to supplant the spirit of American liberty in America.

The appeal of socialism rests, I believe, on three pillars, all of which issue from human beings' natural tribalism: first, socialism's appeal to personal and emotional ties that are perfectly appropriate in families or in small hunter-gatherer groups; second, its appeal to the envy and jealousy—and feeling of righteous indignation—caused by some enjoying more success than

others; and third, the comfort and security—and the sense of deep, united purpose—engendered by all of us rallying behind a single leader who will handle everything and make all problems go away. In families or small groups, especially those that face recurrent dangers of starvation or attack from other small groups, survival may well depend on the degree to which our personal and emotional ties bind us to one another's well being, on the degree to which we all submit to our leader, and on the degree to which we punish the person who shows independence or does not submit. Love and personal relationships are required for a tribe to succeed, and we continue to feel the deep attraction of such appeals.

Yet this indicates what is perhaps the central problem for practical politics today: the fact that we are, as economist David Rose puts it, a small-group species with small-group instincts, while the success of civilized life depends on our taking part in large-scale interactions. Global commercial life requires interactions with people we often do not know and with whom we have no personal or emotional ties, and it takes place in a system of organization that has no leader, whose success not only lies in dynamic and anxiety-producing change but also entails some enjoying fruits of wealth that are not tied to leadership in war, to charismatic rallying of citizens, or to communally-approved single-minded purposes.

Thus today's political and cultural leaders who claim that charity should be global but markets local have things exactly backwards. On the contrary, it is charity that should be based on personal initiative and local knowledge, on knowing when charity would really help and when it might actually hurt; and it is markets that should be global, based on impersonal rules, far-flung cooperation, and spontaneous and undesigned order. Our tribal instincts may be appropriate to charity, but they are not appropriate in a larger commercial order.

The way in which people succeed in commercial, market-based orders, and the origins and nature of the order such large-scale systems display, are difficult to perceive, and even more difficult to credit since they countermand our intuitions and conflict with our natural sensibilities. Order cannot happen without a designer, we intuitively believe, whether that order is of the universe, of biological species on earth, or of markets and the global economy. And no one can or should succeed unless everyone does, we think, just as no one should succeed in the tribe unless the whole tribe succeeds. Notions like the rule of law, the impersonal extended cooperation of markets, and the general if unequal benefits of commercial societies are not only intellectually difficult to comprehend, but suffer from their seeming so counter-intuitive and indeed unnatural.

Yet somehow America managed to build the central aspects of this strange worldview into its very foundation. It did so imperfectly, of course—no human endeavor is ever perfect—but its adoption of some aspects of this worldview led to marginal improvements, which led to still further adoption and still further improvements, until America became the wealthiest and freest

nation on earth, where its citizens enjoyed levels of personal and material prosperity unlike anything ever before seen or even imagined.

In a way we have now become the victims of our own success. Our wealth and freedom have been so great and so extensive that we have begun to enjoy the luxury of forgetting what brought us here. We tend now to think that civilization is the default setting of human institutions, that goods and services and technological progress and continual increases in productivity and betterment of human life will always be there no matter what we do. Instead of appreciating how rare our prosperity is, how fragile the foundations of civilization are, and how much care is required to nurture and protect them, our luxury and ease have allowed us to indulge a historical ignorance of and an indifference toward the future of our civilization, thereby enabling a recrudescence of all those tribalisms that serve us so well in tribes but that are so dangerous in free commercial republics.

Ladies and gentlemen, I believe our civilization is right now hanging in the balance. It will not end overnight, but choices made now will set its course for a long time to come and may indeed be irrevocable. This state of affairs entails an immediate duty for all of us, one that implicates other responsibilities not only to today but at least as much to future generations. That first duty is to instruct ourselves and our compatriots in the nature and principles of the spirit of American liberty, which includes investigation of the economic, political, moral, and cultural institutions that allow and encourage human flourishing. It also includes arriving at an informed understanding of just how fragile and rare civilization is, and just how precious its blessings are.

This first duty issues in another that falls particularly on our shoulders as educators, namely to combat the disease of thought control in higher education and in the other areas of our culture to which it has spread. A robust citizenry requires intellectual curiosity and mental exertion. The cost of limiting inquiry, investigation, and discourse to only those topics that have been approved in advance by political sensibilities is too high: to avoid giving offense and raising uncomfortable questions we trade our energy and our vitality—and thus a crucial part of our humanity. Human dignity requires a vigorous independence, and that in turn requires the lifting of formal restrictions on what can be thought, said, or investigated and on what peaceful activities or associations people may voluntarily undertake; and it requires a prohibition on formal attempts to prevent people from enjoying the fruits of their successes and on forcing others to pay the costs of their failures. It is no small irony that one of the chief victims of the pervasive thought control in higher education today is the very spirit of American liberty that I have outlined. The one-sided political and economic worldview that increasingly dominates much of higher education in America—and, like any monopoly, is acting to restrict competition and solidify its position—is thus doubly pernicious: it not only disrespects the human dignity exemplified in free and vigorous debate, but even as it does that it undermines the delicate

framework of civilization that has enabled it and its benefits to exist. Hunter-gatherer societies, it should not require pointing out, have no universities.

Like the natural habitat of the panther, the bracing environment of freedom and responsibility that characterizes the spirit of American liberty offers no guarantees of success. But no human institution can guarantee success, though it might give the illusion of doing so by trading a temporary security for an increased long-term risk of overall failure. The beneficial offerings of the free society that I advocate, and that I hope you will join me in advocating, are not inconsiderable, however: for they include the only possibility for true human dignity and for true human virtue, not to mention peace and prosperity.

Ladies and gentlemen, I apologize for speaking to you today in what might seem like apocalyptic terms. Unfortunately, I actually believe what I have said: the threats to our civilization are as real and as substantial as I have suggested. But that does not mean I think all hope is lost. On the contrary, I think positive steps can—and indeed must—be taken. For those of us involved in higher education, let me therefore make some specific, if brief, suggestions. They deal with the institution of higher education, with the faculty, and with the students.

First, regarding the institution: I think it is paramount that we create real alternatives to what is currently on offer in higher education. By this I mean more than an isolated endowed professorship here and there. I mean genuine homes for faculty, students, and programs of study that investigate and respect the blessings of liberty. This is especially important now because as the consequences of our current economic and political decisions start to become clear, we must be ready not only with criticisms of mistakes but with a positive case for a venerable alternative conception of politics and economics, along with clear articulations of why our alternative is both economically and morally superior.

An example in my discipline of philosophy is the Center for the Philosophy of Freedom at the University of Arizona, headed by David Schmidtz.^{*} It has just gotten funding to hire several faculty in Arizona's philosophy department, and it is currently running searches. Its aim is to produce new philosophy PhDs who are conversant with the freedom philosophy and who will go on to occupy faculty positions in good departments around the country. This is one promising example, but unfortunately it is perhaps the only such example in philosophy in the country. There is a handful of similar programs being created at other institutions in other disciplines, but we need more of them, especially, in my view, aimed at undergraduate populations.

Next, regarding faculty. We need to create intellectual communities for people who, regardless of their discipline or perspective, understand the importance of freedom and will support one

^{*}My discussion of Professor Schmidtz's program should not be taken to imply his agreement with any of the claims in this essay.

another in their respective scholarly and teaching pursuits. The sense of joint enterprise, of charitable camaraderie, and of mutual reinforcement make the payoff in scholarship, research, and teaching of a community far more than the sum of isolated professors. Indeed, the benefit of having a genuine community—even of just two or three people, as opposed to one—is tremendous and difficult to overstate, as is the psychological devastation that can be wrought by spending one’s career isolated and surrounded by antagonistic faculty. University faculty today strongly preponderate on the left side of the political spectrum, and there is compelling evidence that that dominance is increasing. We stand a real danger of being the last generation of academics to appreciate the spirit of American liberty. We must act now to prevent the extinction of that endangered species, the conservative professor (or perhaps *truly liberal* professor). Creating islands of robust and mutually supportive intellectual community is absolutely critical to that end.

Finally, regarding students. Many college students have a visceral spirit of American liberty that informs their worldviews, but it is usually untutored, and in any case they are often browbeaten into silence or acquiescence once they arrive on campus. Invigorating their native individualism, connecting it with its natural complement responsibility, and getting them to understand their joint connection to the spirit of American liberty may in the end be the most important thing we few, we happy few, can do for the future of our civilization. This will require having them read excellent books, having them learn our country’s and our civilization’s history, and, no less important, enabling and encouraging them to enjoy a community of their own that is founded on the intellectual and moral virtue that a spirit of liberty makes possible.

Let me now close with a final remark. Some people are blessed by living in a time of relative peace and prosperity, with a material comfort that affords them the luxury of not fighting for, or even thinking hard about, the institutions necessary to uphold civilization. When the enemies—both external and internal—of civilization have gained ground, however, and indeed threaten to divert it down a path that may ultimately destroy it, it is then that good men and women are called to declare themselves. I do not think the future is lost; on the contrary, I think not only that the best aspects of Western civilization can be saved but that they are worth considerable effort to preserve. But I also believe that we can no longer afford the luxury of merely tending our own gardens or fiddling outside the city walls. As I see it, we have but two choices. One is to assume that the battle is lost, and thus hunker down and hope to ride out the coming storm. (Ignoring the threats or pretending they do not exist amounts to acquiescence and hence is not a genuine alternative to this first choice.) The only other option is to stand, to make our cause plain, and to shoulder our part of the burden of upholding civilization, leaving the rest in God’s hands.

I choose the latter course. I hope you will join me. Thank you.