

[prosperity paradox]

Little Boxes Made of Ticky-Tacky

First they homogenized the milk—then the countryside.

By Fred Reed

IT IS FASCINATING, when it isn't just depressing, how often the things people want lead to exactly the things they don't want. The other day I was reading G. Gordon Liddy's book of conservative nostalgia, *When I Was a Kid, This Was a Free Country*. He paints a sunset picture of former times when America was free, farmers could fill in swamps without violating wetland laws, and guns were just guns. People were independent, had character, and made their own economic decisions. The market ruled as it ought, and governmental intrusion was minimal.

The picture is accurate. I lived it. I wish it would come back, but it won't. That was a world certain to kill itself. I wonder whether Mr. Liddy understands this—that the freedom he craves leads inevitably to the modern world he, and I, detest. The problem is the fundamental difference between a farmer's filling in a swamp on his land and a remote corporation's buying of the entire country for purposes of its own and not the nation's benefit. Both are exercises in economic freedom.

What happens is that, in an independent-minded rural county full of hardy yeomen, the density of population grows, either nearby or at distant points on each side. A highway comes through because the truckers' lobby in Washington wants it. Building a highway is A Good Thing, because it repre-

sents Progress and provides jobs for a year.

It also makes the country accessible to the big city fifty miles away. A real estate developer buys 500 acres along the river from a self-reliant, character-filled owner by offering sums of money that water the farmer's eyes.

First, 500 houses go up in a bedroom suburb called Brook Dale Manor. A year later, 500 more go up at Dale View Estates. This is A Good Thing, because the character-filled independent now-former farmer is exercising his property rights and because building the suburb creates jobs. The river now looks ugly as the devil, but worrying about that is for wackos.

At Safeway corporate headquarters, the new population shows up as a denser shade of green on a computer screen, and a new supermarket goes in along the highway. This is A Good Thing, exemplifying free enterprise in action and creating jobs in construction. Further, Safeway sells cheaper, more varied and, truth be known, better food than the half-dozen mom-and-pop stores in the county, which go out of business.

Soon the mall men in the big city hear of the county. A billion-dollar company has no difficulty in buying out another character-filled, self-reliant farmer who makes less than \$40,000 a year. A shopping center arrives with a Wal-Mart. This

is A Good Thing, etc. Wal-Mart sells everything—cheap.

It also puts most of the stores in the county seat out of business. With them go the restaurants, which no longer have the walk-by traffic previously generated by small shops. With the restaurants goes the sense of community that flourishes in a town with eateries and stores and a town square. But this is granola philosophy, appealing only to meddlesome lefties.

K-Mart arrives, along with, beside the highway, McDonald's, Arby's, Roy Rogers, and the other way stations en route to coronary occlusion. Strip development is A Good Thing, because it represents the exercise of economic freedom. The county's commerce is now controlled by distant behemoths to whom the place is a pin on a map.

This is A Good Thing. The jobs in these outlets are secure and comfortable. The independent, character-filled frontiersmen are now low-level chain employees, no longer independent because they can be fired. Their new circumstances illustrate the rule that centralized power trumps rugged individualism every time. The local control of the past existed not because of the American character but because technology did not yet allow centralization.

A third suburb, Brook Manor View Downs, appears. The displaced urbanites in these eyesores now outnumber

the character-filled etc. They are also smarter, have lawyers, and organize. They quickly come to control the government of the county.

They want city sewerage, more roads, schools, and zoning. The latter is not unreasonable. In a sparsely settled county, a few hogs penned out back and a crumbling Merc on blocks do not matter. In a yuppie ghetto of quarter-acre manors, they do. Next come leash laws and dog licenses. The boisterous clouds of floppy-eared hounds turn illegal.

Prices go up, as do taxes. But the profits of farming and commercial crabbing in the river do not go up. The farmers and fishermen are gradually forced to sell their land to developers and to go into eight-to-fiving. Unfortunately you cannot simultaneously be character-filled and independent and be afraid of your boss. A hardy self-reliant farmer, when he becomes a security guard at The Gap, is a rented peon. The difference between an independent yeoman and a second-rate handyman is independence.

People make more money and buy houses in Manor Dale Mews but have less control over their time and so no longer build their own barns, wire their houses, and change their own clutch-plates. Prosperity is A Good Thing. Its effect is that the children of the hardy yeoman become dependent on others to change their oil, fix their furnaces, and repair their boats.

The new urban majority are frightened by guns. They do not hunt, knowing that food comes from Safeway and its newly arrived competitor, Giant. They do not like independent countrymen, whom they refer to as rednecks, grits, and hillbillies. Hunting makes no sense to them anyway, since the migratory flocks are vanishing with the wetlands.

Truth be told, it isn't safe to have people firing rifles and shotguns in what is

increasingly an appendage of the city. The clout of the newcomers makes it harder for the locals to let their weapons even be seen in public. The dump is closed to rat-shooting.

The children of the hardy rustics do not do as well in school as the offspring of the come-latelys and are slowly marginalized. Crime goes up as social bonds break down. Before, everyone pretty much knew everyone and what his car looked like. Strangers stood out. Teenagers raised hell, but there were limits. Now the anonymity of numbers sets in. There's no community any longer.

And so the rural character-filled county becomes another squishy suburb of pallid yups who can't put air in their own tires. The rugged rural individualists become cogs in somebody else's wheel. Their children grow up as libidinous mall monkeys drugging themselves to escape boredom. The county itself is a hideous expanse of garish low-end development. People's lives are run from afar.

What it comes to is that the self-reliant citizen's inalienable right to dispose of his property as he sees fit (which I do not dispute) will generally lead to a developer's possession of it. The inalienable right to reproduce will result in crowding, which leads to dependency, intrusive government, and loss of local control.

I'd like to live again in Mr. Liddy's world. Unfortunately it is self-eliminating. Freedom is in the long run inconsistent with freedom, because it is inevitably exercised in ways that engender control. As a species, we just can't keep our pants up. But it was nice for a while. ■

Fred Reed's writing has appeared in the Wall Street Journal, Washington Post, Harper's, and National Review, among other places.

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Arts & Letters

FILM

[*The Two Towers*]

Realizing Tolkien's Genius

By Steve Sailer

WHEN I WAS 11, I received J.R.R. Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* trilogy as a present and soon spent every possible hour reading it. My father eventually got tired of me evading all my chores, so, when I was halfway through the second book (*The Two Towers*), he hid it.

Months later, I found it, but by then my spell was gone. For whatever boyish reason, I never again opened the books up and soon forgot everything. So I represent the extreme of one audience for the movie version—I am the perfect ignoramus who can't tell Saruman from Sauron.

When I heard that the film of *The Two Towers* is broken into three intercut storylines that follow the survivors of the fellowship, I expected to be befuddled by the intricate but awkward-sounding plot.

The handsome human, the elegant elf, and the droll dwarf go help a human kingdom called Rohan fight an onslaught of super orcs sent by Saruman (or maybe Sauron).

Meanwhile, the hobbits Frodo and Sam are wandering through the wilderness with the Ring, where they are pestered by Gollum, a hairless little creep with a split personality.

Meanwhile, two other hobbits, Merry and the one who isn't Merry, spend most of the three-hour running time riding

around in some kind of talking tree as it, uh, lumbers through the forest that Sauron (or maybe Saruman) is chopping down.

Perplexing as it sounds, it becomes transparent in the hands of director Peter Jackson, who has to be one of the greatest cinematic storytellers ever. Even I could follow the story. In fact, within the first four minutes, I was enthralled. Remarkably, this sequel seems more self-contained, more self-sufficient than the original movie. (Credit also should go to the little known film editor D. Michael Horton, who appears to have worked only in New Zealand.)

George Lucas should beg Jackson to save his "Star Wars" franchise by directing the Episode III installment for him.

As the kingly human Aragorn, the 40-year-old Viggo Mortensen confirms himself, after a long and perhaps frustrating apprenticeship, as a top-tier leading man.

The computer-generated Gollum raises a metaphysical question that the academy needs to answer before voting for Best Supporting Actor nominations begins. Andy Serkis, who provides Gollum's voice, also acted out the role for the digital animators. Since Gollum steals the show, should Serkis be eligible for an Oscar?

What about the other audience—the cognoscenti who know Eomer from Eothain? Fortunately, I can give you an expert's opinion, because I went to the screening with Jerry Pournelle.

In some of his careers, Dr. Dr. Pournelle (as the Germans would call him) picked up two Ph.D.'s, served as the Air Force's private Dr. Strangelove forecasting nuclear war fighting capabilities, was deputy mayor of Los Angeles, helped write President Reagan's famous Star Wars speech, and carried out some

undercover spook stuff I can't tell you about. Jerry is also a best-selling novelist of hard science-fiction (*The Mote in God's Eye*) and fantasy (*The Burning City*), both with Larry Niven.

"The Two Towers" left Jerry awe-struck. As a fantasy plot craftsman and Tolkien-lover, he was impressed by how Jackson and Co. altered Tolkien's story just enough to make a tremendous movie out of it, yet no more. "I think they could not have done it any other way," he commented.

Further, he admired how the film caught two sides of Tolkien's worldview: the cold grandeur of the Scandinavian and Finnish myths Tolkien studied vs. the merciful warmth of the Catholicism he professed. Nor does Jackson try to modernize the arch-hereditary politics of the trilogy, where blood will always tell.

The main failing of both movies is that Jackson's interests are too techno-contemporary to do justice to Tolkien's very English Tory/hippie love of farms and forests. "After reading Tolkien, I knew I had to move to the country," said Robert Plant of Led Zeppelin, whose "Ramble On," with its alternating folk melody verses and hammer of the gods heavy-metal choruses evokes both Tolkien's English and Nordic sides.

In contrast, while Jackson is superb with the video game violence of the battle of Helm's Deep, his plotline of the talking tree lamenting to the two minor hobbits the destruction of the woods is not up to rest of this movie, just as the pastoral opening in the Shire got "The Fellowship" off to a slow start.

Rated PG-13 for epic battle sequences and scary images. Parents should take the PG-13 rating quite seriously. There is nothing vulgar in the movie, but I took my 9-year-old to see the first film because he had just read Tolkien's