

LIBERTY TO LIVE BY

In One Sense, at Least, We Are Free in Spite of Ourselves

JOHN ERSKINE

IN our Fourth of July addresses each season there is a certain shift of meaning when we speak of liberty. Both the audience and the orator are aware of the change, and of recent years the word has been somewhat avoided, perhaps because it now seems unreliable. No doubt the early patriots, whose memory of the Revolution was fresh, meant political freedom when they said liberty, and certain discriminating and far-sighted citizens may have realized, perhaps, that the Colonies had achieved economic independence. Nowadays neither political nor economic liberty is for the average man a vital issue; perhaps no kind of liberty is desirable; are we not frequently told that liberty is another term for license? If our elders remark that our manners are free, they mean no compliment.

Strange that we haven't long ago recognized liberty, not as a virtue, nor as a state which necessarily has to be worked for, but as a natural endowment of American life. In one sense, at least, we are free in spite of ourselves. The size of the country insures it. When the early settlers arrived in this vast territory, they encountered few limitations of their freedom. Natural hardships were here, but they overcame them

with surprising speed, if we reckon decades against the long background of history. Since they brought with them a high degree of civilization already achieved, they were spared the centuries of discipline which went to the making of any other modern nation. America was discovered when the colonists learned that more than other people they could do much as they pleased. This is still our privilege—if liberty is a privilege. It may be wise for a moment to consider liberty neither a privilege nor a handicap, but, in America at least, an inevitable characteristic of life.

Hasty objection might be made that the first settlers exhibited extraordinary character and extraordinary sense of discipline. Doesn't the same tradition of discipline persist in what we call our puritanism, or in conservative public opinion in all our communities, large and small? Quite true. But American puritanism and American public opinion have a quality not likely to occur except in a land where liberty is a natural condition. To make any impression on a vast scattered community, public opinion has to be rather strident, over-aggressive, a little hard—and because of this effort the impression it makes may

be ridiculous and negligible. When citizens who follow among us a wise tradition of behavior wish to guide the rest of the community, they too must become aggressive, and they may amuse more than they convince us. As individuals they could not hope to move the large and inert mass, so they organize. We are the land of organized virtue. Our most sincere morality and undoubted good-will comes to be presided over by a chairman, a vice-president and secretary, with a system of annual dues. If in our best moments we are somewhat laughable to the rest of the world, it is not because of any meanness or mistake in our motives, but because even a colossal organization is ineffective in a land which, as long as it wishes to, can remain free.

The success of the first settlers in this country, after all, was due not to a discipline imposed on them by others, but to a responsibility which they themselves assumed. In small countries which have grown slowly for many centuries, and which are now densely populated, public opinion can act normally with a certain flexible mercy and understanding, and with undoubted effect. But think what centuries of development went into building up the fine traditions of England, for example—what patience and what varied experience in the home, in the school, in society at large; and society at large in England was never very large, after all. The land is compact, and it is now full of people. What would have happened if into an almost empty England a migration had occurred of people infinitely further advanced in civilization than the old Saxons and Danes, but not

numerous enough to fill the territory? Whatever else, the English traditions behind English public opinion probably would not have been born. At times some of us hope to solve our American problems by introducing, into the country which imposes freedom upon us, the traditions of an old and smaller, and therefore disciplined, country; but all those who transplant hither philosophies of life which could never be produced here run the danger of seeming to their fellows humorous—imitators of foreign habits, strangers in their own or any other land. For us, given the conditions of the country, its enormous size, the consequent inadequacy of any police force—an inadequacy which must remain; given also our extraordinary distribution of mechanical devices; given the motor-car, which enables almost any citizen to travel where and when he pleases, at whatever speed he likes; given our public libraries and the accessibility of information and ideas—for us the only kind of government is one of personal responsibility, after a frank admission that little besides our conscience will constrain us.

This is not an exaggerated account of our liberty. It is true that we have a costly government in most of the States, and a still more costly one at Washington. It is true that the statute-books are burdened with laws, and prodigious sums of money are voted and spent to enforce a few of them. It is also true, however, that many of the laws which are not strictly enforced are better obeyed than others on which millions are spent. In one case the intelligence and the sense of responsibility of the

citizens have been roused. In the other, the government has proceeded on the false assumption that there are enough police in the world to make Americans live as they don't want to.

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Not the government alone makes this mistake; it is a curious obsession among us all, who ought to know ourselves better. In this condition of liberty which we manage to preserve for our own use, most of us believe our fellows would be improved by more guidance. We credit them with good-will, but we play with the idea that a little compulsion from the outside would develop their virtues. What a queer appearance we make before the eyes of other countries as we continue to mix futile attempts to curtail the liberty of our neighbors with a calm disregard of all such attempts made at our expense! It will perhaps seem a puzzle to the historian, if he concerns himself about it—why we let others seem to impose their will on us, or what pleasure they could possibly have got from supposing that they did impose their will.

A characteristic illustration of this mixture occurs whenever a university or a church or school appeals for large gifts. These objects are admirable, and the natural supposition would be that people interested in them would feel responsible for their proper support. Our method, however, is to engage some expert money-raisers—managers of a drive, as we call it—who of course are paid for their labors by a percentage of the returns or otherwise. They undertake to bring pressure on the supposed friends of the cause. The

supposed friends of the cause, however, instinctively resist the pressure, and usually the drive does not succeed beyond a certain fractional point. The net result is that the sense of freedom in possible subscribers has been delicately offended; to those who wanted the money, however, the efficiency of such drives seems to be demonstrated. Other aspects of this paradox we overlook for the moment—the anomaly, for example, of trying to cultivate loyalty and affection in so commercial a way. What concerns us here is our complete ignoring of the liberty we actually enjoy. After all, what we give in response to such drives is voluntary; nobody can compel us; nobody with an eye on the facts would think he could compel us.

A more recent attempt to invade our liberty, which is likely to end in a similar condition of paradox and failure, is illustrated by the various commercial ventures which pretend to choose a book for us to read each month. Their advertisements sound plausible, if we are not on our guard. They imply that excellent literature is constantly overlooked by the reading public only because in this busy world we haven't time to read all and find out what is best. A small group of devoted philanthropists have decided to scan the field and pick out the best for us. At its worst this sort of scheme would be a serious menace to the intellectual liberty of every intelligent man and woman. If they could succeed, the power of all such commercial ventures over our intellectual life would be fantastic. No program of censorship yet proposed would be so far reaching. As a matter of fact,

we are led to believe that thousands of people do subscribe to such enterprises. Yet here the American paradox shows itself. Having subscribed to a book a month to be chosen for them by a jury, the American public then insists on returning the book, if they don't like it. In other words, the liberty in which we habitually live is too comfortable to throw off all at once. There are lands in which literary juries of proved authority do choose certain books each month, which are subscribed to by readers who wish to follow the taste of such authorities. It is easily conceivable, for example, that if Bernard Shaw, or H. G. Wells, or Arthur Schnitzler, or Romain Rolland, should choose each month the book he personally prefers, thousands of people, because of his name, would wish to read the book. But this could happen only in an old and disciplined country where authority of all kinds, literary authority included, has been built up. The typical American would reserve the right to disagree with any one of these men. The attempt, therefore, to choose a book for him develops in practice into nothing more extraordinary than plain book-marketing under the mask of a critical choice.

In both these illustrations one can easily regret a lack of responsibility either on the part of those who ought to subscribe to good works, or of those who ought to seek out and read good books. Let us grant that we none of us live up to our duties in this and some other matters. But if we are willing to grant also that the peculiar circumstances of American life force us to do our duty in a state

of freedom, we have the right to ask whether a fictitious discipline can do anything for us but harm. The financial drive takes out of our gifts the spontaneity and the pleasure which ought to be in them; it takes away from the givers the credit which is really theirs and bestows it on the company which "put the drive over." The various book clubs, if they were thoroughly effective, would take from the genuine reader the habit of browsing and sampling, the invaluable habit of forming his taste in accord with the needs of his own character. None of our schemes for improving each other, even supposing they are quite sincere, makes provision for that increase of responsibility in us which must occur before we can live wisely in our freedom.

On the other hand, there are plenty of instances familiar to us all of responsibility properly assumed. They occur where there is no silly or fictitious compulsion. On a lonely road almost every citizen drives his motor-car carefully to the right as he goes around the traffic post. The chances are slight of his being arrested for making a left turn in the wrong place. But his sense of co-operation has been enlisted in the safety of all who drive on the roads, and in this respect he has become a responsible citizen. The laws which he will not obey, on the other hand, are too obvious to mention, and the reason why they cannot be enforced is simple enough; for the same reason the punitive expedition which President Wilson sent into Mexico failed to catch Villa—there was too much room in Mexico; where there is room there is liberty.

If we seem laughable to other countries, and if they are inclined to point out certain hypocrisies in our conduct, perhaps we ought to explain to them that our appearance belies us; we are not really hypocrites; we have only made the mistake of ignoring the liberty we continue to live by. Having ignored it, we are forced to exaggeration whenever we pretend to exercise a discipline which does not exist. Yet since we continue ourselves to live in a state of freedom, you may meet us face to face, and discover we are not nearly so bad as at a distance we seemed. You may indict our puritanism all you choose at a distance; you may paint dreadful pictures of our prohibition fanatics; you may show the anti-prohibitionists as degenerate drunkards. But our Puritans, when you meet them, are for the most part really charming people, who do not permit their puritanism to interfere with their own happiness, nor with the freedom of any genial impulses. Even the convinced prohibitionist, who himself will not drink, is often, perhaps usually, quite ready to wink at his neighbor who is breaking the law. Sometimes he will provide for his guest the vile stuff he does not believe in himself. On the other hand, the anti-prohibitionist, when you survey his habits at close range, often gets on without drinking at all. This contrast of our actual selves and our appearances might as well be admitted. If we insist that it indicates a certain error in our philosophy, rather than a flaw in our morals, yet something remains to explain and defend in such a separation of principles and behavior.

Shall we say it is a ground for optimism that our behavior is so much better than our principles? Morality exists among us, but how about intelligence? That is why, on our so-called Independence day, some of us wish that independence might be recognized as a fact; that our conduct, such as it is, might be recognized as our conduct; that our principles might be announced with regard to what we are likely to do about them, and with the same charity with which we are likely to live among our neighbors.

The ambition to make our principles match our conduct, or our conduct our principles, is, however, only the more optimistic approach to the problem of liberty in America. In certain darker moods we have to notice that foreigners think neither worth reconciling with the other, since neither our conduct nor our theories have much amiability or charm. They see a strong resemblance between the United States at the moment and Russia. Both countries are large in territory. Both by their very size afford their citizens an amount of liberty which no government, however strong, can really limit. In both countries certain public opinion is at the moment trying to limit liberty, and in both this attempt has resulted, of course, in exaggeration, and, in various degrees, in terrorism. In both countries a free exchange of ideas is suppressed, or, at least, the attempt is made to suppress it. From both countries a sense of humor seems to be departing. Both countries make the impression of trying not simply to solve their own problems, but to

convert the world to some philosophy or other which the world unfortunately doesn't want. In both countries the attention of serious people seems to be on the wrong problems; and vital questions, much more important, go neglected. In both countries the forces which are on the side of goodness, and undoubtedly profess a sincere wish to benefit mankind, manifest themselves, unfortunately, in ways unlovely, ungraceful, inhumane.

Not all the citizens of the United States, of course, are busy making laws against their fellows, or are busy evading laws. The majority of us are living not by compulsion, and not by liberty plus a sense of responsibility, but by a loose sort of pragmatism. We let the strident fellow try to improve us, and we let the outraged anti rebuke him. We ourselves lie low and make a sort of tacit bet on human nature—in the end we expect the problem to settle itself. Meanwhile we shall keep quiet and do as we please, but do it surreptitiously. Such conduct, no doubt, was followed successfully in other world crises when liberty was at stake. No doubt there were discreet and unheroic souls who lived peacefully through the French Revolution, taking down the shop shutters in the morning, putting them up at night, and thanking Heaven for continued peace and prosperity. No doubt there are many Russians who, in spite of their economic difficulties have been living undisturbed and uninterrupted through these recent troubled years. If merely to survive in comfort is the true purpose of life, then this philosophy is sound.

But we wish some one would say in a Fourth of July speech that no philosophy is sound that does not begin by accepting the facts of our world, and that an American philosophy of government should begin by accepting the fact of individual liberty.

Fortunately we can all agree on many more things in our life besides safety on the highway. In such matters our sense of responsibility puts a limit on license. If Independence day meant anything very philosophic to us, we should use it to remind ourselves that liberty cannot be enjoyed unless we are responsible. If I am free to travel in all directions, or to ramble from one trade or profession to another, or to change my philosophy or my religion overnight, and as often as I like, my life will soon become insignificant unless I find a meaning for it; that is, unless I choose one direction to go in, one philosophy to follow, one trade to work at. No one can compel me to choose, but I ought to choose all the more firmly because I am free. In a state of freedom we are not an individual or a personality until we have made a choice and have continued true to it. It was the peculiar privilege of America to be the one land in history in which men who had already inherited a long culture, and the powers and resources of much science, could choose their way of life. That is still our privilege, so far as the natural condition of the country can conserve it for us. But we remove the bloom from liberty by silly attempts to substitute, for an intelligent character within, a fictitious discipline from the outside.

THE TRAITOR

LESLIE GORDON BARNARD

IT BEGAN, of course, with Mr. Reggie's return. That was on a Friday, and a great to-do there was about the house; and even I—who knew him but slightly—felt excited about it and distressed because Sir Loyden let his sense of military propriety overcome the sentiment that almost impelled him to meet the boy at the boat.

Before the morning of Friday was over, I had other reasons to wish the major-general had gone. He snarled at me over the morning dictation, until I thoroughly wished he would betake himself to his foul-smelling laboratory . . . his larger one—not the innocuous little test-tube place in the house, but the one at the rear of the estate, where he won his O.B.E. in the World War. However his renown as a chemist and scientist require no restatement here. That is common property. And his speech before an audience of military bigwigs, on the value of poison-gas, particularly for punitive expeditions, is hardly less commonly known.

From his dictation, Sir Loyden swung suddenly upon me, with a sharp, "What time does that train get in?"

I told him 3:11.

"You've ordered Gregg to meet him with the car?"

"No, sir. I thought you would be going—"

"Who the devil asked you to think?"

I let that pass. There are many things I let pass with Sir Loyden. Somewhere, down in the man, there was a magnet for my affection, such an affection as one might have for a prize bulldog of uncertain temper. Straight as a string, Sir Loyden is, I'll say that for him, but a red-faced martinet of the old school, with whose ideas I was in constant opposition. I have sometimes fancied that it was this very quality that cemented our relationship, as employer and employee. To do his best work, he must be roused by some antagonism, expressed or implied; and I was often the spur. He liked, I am convinced, to wave his ideas before me—red rags to a bull!—and then to twit me quite unmercifully.

As now. "Slade," he growled, "what d'you make out of this Nurabian business?"

"That we should have been out of there long ago, sir! We went in ostensibly to do police duty, and remained to act as agents of the 'interests.'"

"Humph!"

I had expected something more explosive, especially when you consider that Mr. Reggie had been one of the Nurabian expedition, having been gazetted as lieutenant just be-