

COMMONWEAL

American Mojo

by Douglas Wilson

*"America was, is, and—we pray—
will continue to be the place where
more than anyplace else, dreams
actually do come true"*

—William J. Bennett

The key phrase to notice in William Bennett's statement is "more than anyplace else." In recent years, a number of well-meaning patriots have taken up the theme of what is called American exceptionalism. This is in part a reaction to those among us who managed to get onto the Lord High Executioner's "little list" a century or so before they were even born—I refer of course to the "idiot who praises, with enthusiastic tone, all centuries but this, and every country but his own." Blame America First is a reflex action on the left, and it appears that some have grown really tired of it and think that Praise America First is a good alternative. But when we simply react to one dumb thing, it more often than not results in just another dumb thing.

Sometimes the sentiment is comparatively restrained, as with Bennett, and sometimes it isn't. Giving a new meaning to the phrase "taking the cake," David Gelernter recently wrote a book describing Americanism as "the fourth great western religion":

"America" is one of the most beautiful religious conceptions mankind has ever known. It is sublimely humane, built on strong confidence in humanity's ability to make life better . . . The ideas that emerge in a blaze of light center on liberty, equality, and democracy for all mankind.

Now these are not the ravings of an

overheated and provincial Fourth of July speaker located in a small Midwest town a century or more ago. Gelernter teaches at Yale, writes for *The Weekly Standard*, and in every respect appears to be clothed and in his right mind. Where is all of this coming from?

We know that we are in the grip of this peculiar temptation when we think that no one else in the history of the world could possibly have experienced it—although, in fact, pretty much everyone has. But we think that Nebuchadnezzar, when he was looking with dangerous satisfaction at everything he had built, could not have been experiencing the same legitimate pride that we do because what he had built was in no way American. We look down on pride in others, it turns out, not because it is a deadly sin for everybody, but because in their case it appears they are making a factual error.

But chauvinism is as ordinary as dirt, and we are as susceptible as anybody else. C.S. Lewis noted the problem in *That Hideous Strength*:

"You're right, Sir," [Dimple] said with a smile. "I was forgetting what you have warned me always to remember. This haunting is no peculiarity of ours. Every people has its own haunter. There's no special privilege for England—no nonsense about a chosen nation. We speak about Logres because it is our haunting, the one we know about."

So in one respect this idea of American exceptionalism is a gigantic folly, but in another it is an understandable mishandling of two things. The first is that as nations rise and fall, and as fortunes wax and wane, it is usually the case that one place is a better place to live than another. To state as a matter of dogma that every place must be at any given point in time "just as good as" any other is egalitarianism, pure and simple. Some, to head off the fol-

lies of jingoism, have resorted to that kind of egalitarianism, but the problem is that the follies of egalitarianism then perpetuate in their turn the follies of the next round of jingoism. Since America is clearly a better place to live than, say, North Korea, the stage is set for the exceptionalism mistake. At any given time, it is raining in one place and not in another, and most of us know enough to come in out of the rain. But if we start to assume that "sunshine here and rain there" is a force of history or a religious ideal, we have forgotten the importance of time and history, and the fluctuations that occur in the course of history. Things change, as it turns out, and they change according to predictable patterns. Sir John Glubb once noted that nations and empires have life spans, just like people do. But when they are on top of their game, they always forget that they do.

But there is a second reason the mistake of exceptionalism is understandable, and this has to do with a paradox resident in our founding and which is (still) found in the structure of our institutions. The American founding represented something that really was exceptional—that exceptional thing being that the Founding Fathers knew that Americans were just like everybody else. The Constitution presupposes that Americans are just as greedy and grasping as the rest of the world's citizens, and so we needed to adjust our firewalls accordingly. But in recent years, the national-greatness riff has touted this American exceptionalism as though we were unique creatures in the world—which, sadly, means that we have become like every other powerful nation that has ever existed. With our most recent round of chatter on our unique status in history, we now appear to have joined the herd.

"National greatness" neocons have argued strongly for this American exceptionalism. In their view, America is the last, best hope of the world, as the subtitle of William Bennett's two-vol-

ume work puts it. To this kind of overstatement, it is sometimes tempting to respond with a curt, "No, it isn't," and be done with the discussion. But to do this misses something important: At the founding of our federal government, something exceptional really was going on.

Consider these well-known words of James Madison from *Federalist* 51. Such a sentiment could be multiplied from numerous other sources—our entire form of government presupposes it. And the modern cheerleaders of things American appear to have forgotten it.

It may be a reflection on human nature, that such devices should be necessary to control the abuses of government. But what is government itself, but the greatest of all reflections on human nature? If men were angels, no government would be necessary. If angels were to govern men, neither external nor internal controls on government would be necessary. In framing a government which is to be administered by men over men, the great difficulty lies in this: you must first enable the government to control the governed; and in the next place oblige it to control itself.

Put another way, our form of government assumes constancy of human nature, and does not rest on the promise of a unique American nature. The structure of American government was unique because the founders knew that the raw material that we were going to have to work with was exactly the same. Now that we have come to believe that the raw material is unique, our form of government is growing monotonously like every other despotism that has ever preened itself in front of a mirror. At the beginning of *Anna Karenina*, Tolstoy says that all happy families are alike, and that every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way. We might take the liberty of making a similar observation here. Every healthy nation is like ev-

ery other healthy nation, content to be "like the others." But every diseased polis has a thousand reasons for believing in its own uniqueness, and the crowning irony is that if you bother to work through the list, those reasons have a real monotony to them.

Our founders, when they crafted a form of government to oblige the governors to control themselves, were placing Americans under these constraints. Why? Because when it came to these issues, Americans were as little to be trusted with unrestricted power as anybody else. When Lord Acton said that power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely, he did not add, "except when dealing with Americans."

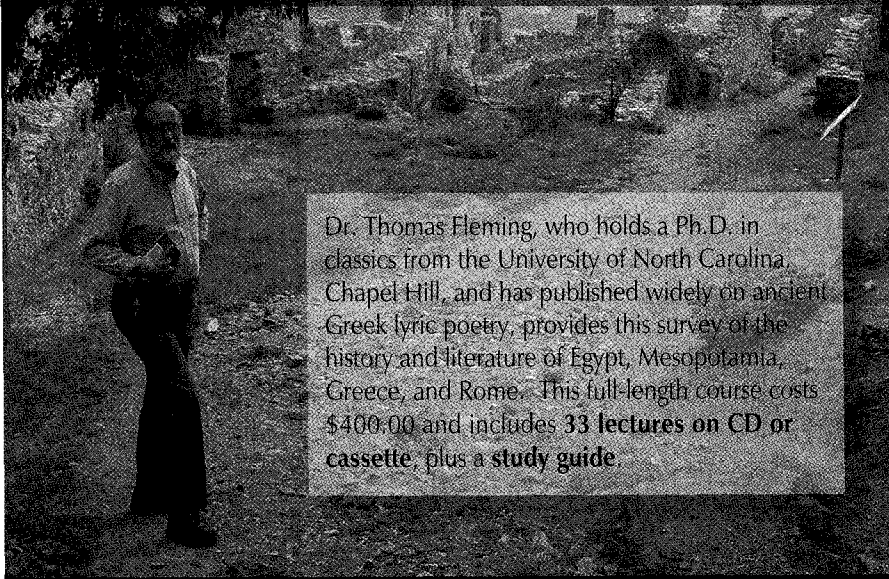
In *The Lord of the Rings*, that marvelous tale about the rejection of unrestricted power, Gandalf rejects the ring of power, as does Elrond and Galadriel. Frodo resists the lure of that power for most of his torturous journey. The means to defeat all their

foes had fallen into their hands, and the entire trilogy is about their resolve to throw that means away. The fellowship of the ring was unique, because they knew they were not unique. They were no more to be trusted with this kind of thing than Sauron was. But even among the good guys, there was a strong pull to believe that everything would be different in "this one instance." America today is Boromir; the nobility still present in the failure does not keep it from being a failure.

So we need to remember two basic things: how ordinary and pedestrian national hubris is, and how extraordinary national humility is. You can get nationalistic hubris off the rack at Kmart. Our Constitution presupposes that Americans are no more to be trusted with unbounded power than George III was to be trusted with it. The Bill of Rights loops restriction after restriction over the heads of Americans in power. The Tenth Amendment was not designed to keep the

33 RECORDED LECTURES PLUS STUDY GUIDE

History and Literature of the Ancient World



Dr. Thomas Fleming, who holds a Ph.D. in classics from the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, and has published widely on ancient Greek lyric poetry, provides this survey of the history and literature of Egypt, Mesopotamia, Greece, and Rome. This full-length course costs \$400.00 and includes 33 lectures on CD or cassette, plus a study guide.

To order, call (800) 383-0680 or visit www.ChroniclesMagazine.org

Russian czars at bay, and the founders were not anticipating the rise of communism on the other side of the world. That is not what they were guarding against.

But even this important point must not be taken woodenly or simplistically. Ronald Reagan's use of the Lord's phrase "city on a hill" was taken from John Winthrop, and so there certainly was some form of self-aware exceptionalism from the beginning. But it is important to note the differences between a tempered Calvinistic optimism that understood the constant need to "stay under" in order for God to continue to bless, and the unbridled Pelagian optimism that finally came into its heretical own with the archangel Woodrow, as Mencken once called him. It is possible for founders actually to understand how real exceptionalism actually works. Those who build successfully do understand. Those who inherit, and who wreck what they inherit, do not.

Kipling understood this principle—"lest we forget, lest we forget"—and now that the empire he was admonishing has forgotten precisely what he urged them not to, with the attendant consequences of becoming one with Nineveh and Tyre, it appears to be our turn to forget the gods of the copy-book headings.

There is a vast difference between recognizing that things are going our way for the moment, which is simply an enjoyment of American mojo, and the assumption that such temporary advantages are representative of a transcendent and shimmering reality. The former is a creaturely blessing; the latter is hellish. This distinction is not a trivial point, for as our Lord once put it (laboring as He did under the disadvantage of not being American), he who exalts himself will be humbled.

Douglas Wilson is pastor of Christ Church in Moscow, Idaho, and senior fellow of theology at New St. Andrews College. Collision, a documentary chronicling his debates with Christopher Hitchens, is scheduled for release in 2009.

DISCRIMINATION

Who's Insane?

by Evan McLaren

A piece appeared recently in my local newspaper by one Anthony C. Infanti, professor at the University of Pittsburgh School of Law. He wrote in support of a pending state antidiscrimination bill that would ban discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation and "gender" identity.

There's no urgency in attacking his position or his argument. Infanti's piece is unremarkable in light of overall trends and attitudes toward sex, in general, and exotic sexual behavior, in particular. Wherever these trends lead, we are going to get there. In a borrowed phrase, fuming buys nothing.

Still, right-thinking people are not going to take Professor Infanti's words at face value. He presents a wholly economic rationale for antidiscrimination law. Excluding people means excluding potential business and revenue. If we include everyone, we accrue the economic benefits.

Does that make sense, as far as it goes? Perhaps, if one is willing to make of two or three statistics a portrait of our entire economic situation, and the way out of it. Eventually, though, the very logic runs out, since judgments ultimately have to be made about inclusion and exclusion, and people have to be placed on different footings based on their identities and roles in society. If you simply say no one should be excluded from full membership in any area of life, you end up losing the ability to say what citizenship and life are about, except that they seem to be things we can reconfigure to suit our individual preferences and attitudes.

That's pretty thin gruel conceptually, and it's even worse as a practical way of dealing with things. If we accept such valorization of individual choice as a standard, we end up rejecting anything that appears to limit that choice in any way. That means turning our backs on what the sociologist Will Herberg called "the funded

wisdom of the past"—those inherited customs, habits, and attitudes that inform our approach to the world.

Not all of our past attitudes are to be invoked as things worth restoring; such is impossible, anyway, since differing attitudes often contradict each other. But at some level we should be surprised to find that justice and basic decency now require us to replace our inherited public understandings with a single self-contained principle of equality that is to override all other considerations. That was not the Founding Fathers' original intention, and it was never our peoples' purpose.

Now, though, we are subject to the cult of mindless expertise, demanding with totalitarian aggression and metaphysical certitude that we greet the onrushing exotica of the age as natural, normal, uncontroversial, healthy, wonderful, and beautiful, and to hell with you if you hesitate to agree! Chaos and confusion are widespread and palpable, especially when it comes to sex, and another nondiscrimination law is not going to help us make better sense of ourselves and our situation.

That's quite a bleak assessment, I admit, but I don't mean to be a crank or a downer. Our leadership is aggressively unreflective and self-serving, and overall trends are bad and likely to get worse. But pessimism is not hopelessness. The message here is merely that the noise coming from our respectable media and academic authorities is on balance silly and decivilizing and not to be listened to. The role of the editorialist is to reassure: You who make sense of things in ways that jibe less with fashionable standards and more with the traditional prejudices (yes, there's that word!) of Western civilization are not backward or bigoted. Instead, you may be part of the last trace of collective sanity our civilization has left.

Evan McLaren is a graduate of Kenyon College and a contributor to TakiMag.com.

