

An Exclusive *Freeman* Interview:

## Historian Paul Johnson on American Liberty

For friends of freedom, Paul Johnson is perhaps today's most beloved historian. He tells a dramatic story with moral passion. He gives readers tremendous pleasure as he celebrates liberty and denounces tyranny. "Paul Johnson," declared *Wall Street Journal* editor Robert Bartley, "is one of the premier wordsmiths of the English language." *The New Yorker* called him "a good writer and clear thinker." Even *Foreign Affairs*, pillar of the establishment, acknowledged his achievements: "A latter-day Mencken, Johnson is witty, gritty and compulsively readable."

Johnson's 28 books, including *The History of Christianity* (1976), *The History of the Jews* (1987), *The Intellectuals* (1988), and *The Birth of the Modern* (1991), have covered some of the biggest stories of all time.

Johnson is most famous for *Modern Times* (1983), the breath-taking epic of twentieth-century tyranny. Before that book, intellectuals commonly distinguished between bad "right-wing" totalitarianism (fascism and Nazism) and justifiable "left-wing" totalitarianism (socialism and Communism), whose crimes were overlooked. Johnson dared to denounce them all as evil. While he wasn't the first to do this, he had the greatest impact as he made one tyrant after another accountable for their savage killings.

*Modern Times* never sold fast enough to

hit a bestseller list, but word-of-mouth was fantastic. For example, *American Spectator*: "Modern Times is an extraordinary book." *Los Angeles Times*: "Johnson's insights are often brilliant and of value in their startling freshness." *Times Literary Supplement* (London): "powerful, lively, compelling and provocative." Translated into 20 languages, *Modern Times* went on to sell an astounding six million copies. Johnson issued a revised edition in 1991.

For decades, history has been the province of academics, but Johnson came up through journalism. Born in Barton, Lancashire, Johnson was educated at Stonyhurst, England's oldest Catholic boarding school, and at Magdalen College, Oxford. He worked as assistant editor of Paris-based *Realités* (1952–1955) and then the weekly *New Statesman* (1955–1970). He was editor during his last six years there.

Johnson emerged as a herald of liberty in the 1970s. "I had once thought liberty was divisible, that you could have very great personal liberty within a framework of substantial state control of the economy," he reflects, "but I don't mind saying I was quite wrong. The thing that finally convinced me was the issue of compulsory unionism." He made his conversion clear in *Enemies of Society* (1977), an extended attack on what he called the "fascist left."

It's easy to see why readers eagerly await Johnson's next book, a history of the Amer-



*Paul Johnson*

ican people. In October 1994 he provided a glimpse with three stirring lectures at Manhattan's elegant J. Pierpont Morgan Library. The place was packed. Among the celebrities present were financial wizard Theodore Forstmann and best-selling author Tom Wolfe. Johnson focused on the role of religion in America. Recordings of his lectures were snapped up around the world.

Johnson has quite a presence. He's 6 feet 1 inch tall, has a ruddy complexion, and a mane of champagne hair. He speaks with a commanding voice.

Johnson lives with his wife of nearly 40 years, Marigold Hunt, in Bayswater, London. They have three sons, a daughter, and five grandchildren.

There are some 10,000 volumes in his personal library. When researching a subject, he fills hundreds of notebooks with material. Then to help concentrate as much as possible, he writes in a ground-floor study about the size of a closet, surrounded by

reference books which are all within reach of his chair. He composes on an Olympia electric typewriter and logs his sources on an adjacent typewriter. "I write in the morning, because that's when my brain seems to work best," he says.

His study window overlooks a garden where he's building a studio for his painting. He avidly paints watercolors of landscapes, cathedrals, and castles—he has had two one-man shows in London. Once the studio is finished, he will turn to oils.

Recently *The Freeman* talked with Johnson about his latest work. He generously shared insights on American liberty and individualism.

***The Freeman:*** The pages of a Manhattan phone book could easily pass for a phone book of Buenos Aires or a lot of other cities with English names, German names, Italian names, Jewish names, Spanish names, and so on. Yet breakthroughs for liberty occurred mainly in America.

**Johnson:** The majority of people who came to America in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries were from the British Isles. They shared a common language, a common political tradition, and the common law. America benefited from a debate about liberty, which had gone on in England for some 150 years.

***The Freeman:*** In your Morgan lectures, you talked about how religion contributed to American liberty.

**Johnson:** The ethical basis of the United States was a broad-based Protestantism.

This was the case even though not all the colonies were Protestant. Maryland was Catholic for a long time. Rhode Island was a non-denominational state, formed by people who broke away from the restrictive Protestantism of New England.

This Protestantism didn't base itself on narrow points of religious doctrine. The stress was on morals rather than doctrine. There was general agreement on how people ought to behave, subscribed to by Catholics and Jews who came to America.

***The Freeman:*** How did religious freedom develop in America?

**Johnson:** The clergy had much less power than in Europe. This was true from the very beginning. American ministers could determine church membership, but that was about it. American churches were always managed by laymen. They didn't have the special privileges which were traditional in Europe. This is why European anti-clericalism never took root in America.

Religion became a series of voluntary movements, or awakenings as they were called, which had a profound impact on America's constitutional and social development. The first Great Awakening began in 1719 and continued for about a quarter-century. It created a ecumenical, American-type religious practice which affected all religious groups.

The Great Awakening was characterized by evangelical vigor. There was a tendency to downgrade the clergy. Little interest in liturgical correctness. Above all, an emphasis on individual spiritual experience. The key text was Revelations 21:5: "Behold, I make all things new."

The most famous of the Great Awakeners was Jonathan Edwards, who stressed reason and natural law as a guide for Christian conduct. He remarked that he read John Locke's *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* "with more pleasure than the most greedy miser finds when gathering up handfuls of silver and gold."

The Great Awakening was a necessary prelude to the American Revolution. Remember John Adams's famous lines that "The Revolution was effected before the War commenced. The Revolution was in the minds and hearts of the people and changed their religious sentiments of their duties and obligations."

The triumph of voluntarism in American religion led almost everybody to link Christian enthusiasm with political liberty.

**The Freeman:** How about the role of religion in abolishing slavery?

**Johnson:** There was a theology of abolition which was primarily a moral theology. In 1845, Edward Beecher published a series of articles on what he called the nation's

"organic sin" of slavery. These articles invested the abolitionist movement with a whole series of evangelical insights.

*Uncle Tom's Cabin* itself had a background in religion, especially moral theology. It was a self-improvement tract as well as a political tract.

Organized religions, however, remained largely silent on the slavery issue before the Civil War. Catholics, Episcopalians, and Lutherans avoided public debate which would split their ranks. Presbyterian, Wesleyan, and Baptist church leaders tried but were less successful in avoiding debate about slavery.

After the outbreak of the Civil War, religious leaders quoted Scripture to support their respective sides. Northern clergymen portrayed the conflict as a holy war. Southern clergymen did as much as they could to prolong the futile struggle.

**The Freeman:** What was the impact of immigration on liberty?

**Johnson:** The more people came to America, the greater the diversity of views, including religious views.

Catholics, Jews, and myriad Protestant sects wanted their views tolerated, free from persecution.

It became harder for zealots to impose their views on a burgeoning, diverse population.

Roger Williams easily broke away from Puritan orthodoxy and founded his own free colony—Rhode Island.

By about 1700, the Puritans had lost their religious monopoly on New England.

So the increasing number and diversity of people helped protect against the possibility that any one group would gain political control over others.

**The Freeman:** Would you say immigration generally limited the power of elites?

**Johnson:** Yes, large numbers of immigrants started businesses and grew rich. They challenged dominant firms. They gained political influence. Both markets and politics became more competitive.

In the process, immigrants helped America gain the economic means and foreign connections which helped achieve Indepen-

dence. It's hard to imagine America winning the Revolutionary War if it had been a poor, unsophisticated backwater.

**The Freeman:** How has immigration affected American culture?

**Johnson:** Immigrants contributed tremendous dynamism.

People were transformed by leaving a settled society where they had a place. They were energized as they entered a new world. Anything was possible. The immigration experience stimulated Protestants and Catholics alike in America. I think one reason Jews have been dynamic is that they were always on the move, having to establish themselves in new places. I see the same stimulus at work today on Asians in Britain and America.

Many visitors commented on the dynamism of American society, and I think a great deal of it has to do with the number of new people struggling upward.

**The Freeman:** Why were our Founding Fathers so successful in securing a reasonably free society when similar efforts elsewhere failed?

**Johnson:** A major reason was that proposed political changes were subject to public debate and discussion.

During the 1770s and 1780s, America wasn't yet a democracy. Male suffrage was limited. Still, a lot of males could vote.

Equally important, the Founding Fathers were imbued with the democratic spirit. They believed every man had a right to voice his views. Debate took place in public meetings, legislatures and in the growing media.

There was a proliferation of daily and weekly newspapers. When a new town was founded, often the first building erected was for printing presses. Newspapers circulated throughout the colonies.

America was fortunate that there was an outstanding group of people who shaped the debate and the Constitution itself. One would have to go a long way in history to find a group as competent, cosmopolitan, and skillful with the language.

The most important documents were framed in eloquent language which could be grasped by ordinary people. Both the

Declaration of Independence and the Constitution were beautifully written. Generations of schoolchildren learned them. As a literary document, the U.S. Constitution is infinitely superior to any of the 12 constitutions France has had since then.

Because most people could appreciate the Constitution, it became theirs. They supported it, worked with it, and it has endured, contributing to remarkable political stability. In other countries, there was a lack of support for constitutions which were a tangle of bureaucratic jargon.

**The Freeman:** Why was a separation of powers successfully established in the United States but not in France where the Revolution turned into the Reign of Terror?

**Johnson:** Americans didn't try to create something out of nothing.

The U.S. Constitution evolved from the experience of 13 colonies. This, experience, in turn, evolved from British experience going back to Magna Carta (1215). The Founding Fathers, especially James Madison, analyzed many other constitutional arrangements as well. A separation of powers was present in the most successful previous constitutions, and the Founding Fathers were not only determined that it would be present in their constitution, but they would push the principle farther than it had ever gone before.

Moreover, the Founding Fathers were loyal to their respective states, and they weren't about to embrace a constitution which made the states mere precincts of the federal government. That's why the resulting Constitution divided power between states and federal government as well as among branches of the federal government.

By contrast, during their Revolution the French cut themselves off from past experience. They changed the names of the months. They changed reckoning of years. They threw out religion. In their hurry to push political change, they established even more centralization than there had been under the monarchy. Political change occurred not through open debate, as in America, but through violence. It escalated into the Terror, followed by Napoleon's

authoritarian regime and more than a decade of war which led to even more centralization.

**The Freeman:** Some observers have remarked that a major accomplishment of the Constitution was to establish perhaps the world's largest free trade area. What do you think?

**Johnson:** No question about it, establishing a free trade area was an enormously important stimulus for prosperity in America. This began decades before the high-tariff era following the Civil War.

Europe was a lot of little markets separated by border barriers. People who travelled across France had to stop and pay local taxes frequently. The situation was even worse in Germany and Italy which consisted of many small states. There were toll collectors all along major roads as well as rivers like the Rhine. These taxes were a major obstacle to enterprise.

One reason the Industrial Revolution began in Britain was that it formed a relatively large free trade area—England, Wales, Scotland, and Ireland.

Since America was a larger territory, the potential was much greater, but it took a while to develop. Initially, the colonies traded mainly with Britain. Then came immigrants who helped settle remote regions. Roads and canals helped connect commercial centers. The economy really began to grow as people traded with each other, and America became a vast free market.

**The Freeman:** Why did individualism develop more in America than anywhere else?

**Johnson:** Probably because the way America created and sustained the spirit of entrepreneurial initiative. I don't think you can separate the politics from the economics of this.

America is unique in being a large country where anyone who has an idea can try it out and encounter the fewest obstacles from government and society. This is still true despite the explosion of government regulations during the twentieth century. Entrepreneurs from overseas recognize the comparatively favorable business climate right away.

Individualism is expressed through the political system, too. America is among the few countries where the chief executive is directly elected by everyone.

I believe people elsewhere value individualism, but they don't get much opportunity to express it. For instance, in Britain, we have a Parliamentary system and cabinet government. You vote for a party, and if it gets the support of a majority, it picks the Prime Minister and cabinet.

**The Freeman:** Many people imagined that government power could be made to serve the general interest, yet again and again we've seen government power captured by politically connected special interests who are better off than most of us. Any comment?

**Johnson:** Yes, every imaginable point of view has a lobbying presence in Washington, D.C. You have traditional pressure groups like big airlines, fruit growers, or agricultural workers. In addition, there's been a proliferation of lobbyists representing those interested in child care, single mothers, mental health, and so forth.

Many laws—like tax increases—are enacted although polls might suggest most people are against them. Conversely, Congress kills measures, such as term limits, despite strong popular support.

All this has had an alarming impact on government finances. In the past, following a crisis like a war or depression, Washington gradually paid down its debt. President Andrew Jackson actually wiped it out. But around 1975, the national debt began to rise even though there wasn't a war, depression, or other emergency. It rose because powerful lobbyists generated irresistible pressures to spend more money. The spending and debt continue to spin out of control.

**The Freeman:** Why does American individualism seem to have survived despite the enormous growth of government power during the twentieth century?

**Johnson:** Well, that is quite remarkable. Under Herbert Hoover, who had overseen some dramatic expansion of government during World War I, Washington responded



to the Great Depression by again expanding its power. This, of course, accelerated under Franklin Roosevelt. It was fashionable for New Dealers to talk about Soviet-type economic planning. Government power expanded even more dramatically during the Second World War.

Yet America never went for statism as much as other countries. Maybe because the spirit of individualism somehow endured, you didn't have the nationalizations which swept through Britain, Europe, and Asia after the war. On the contrary, many war-time bureaucracies were dismantled. There was some breathing room for entrepreneurs, and they created the postwar boom which opened new markets, developed new technologies, and in many ways helped renew the spirit of individualism.

Adam Smith remarked that there is a lot of ruin in a nation. People can absorb frightening abuse from government and bounce back if they're able to preserve at least a little freedom.

***The Freeman:*** What do you think it takes to bring government under control?

**Johnson:** Enormous strength of political will.

Often this develops only in a severe economic crisis which marks the dead end of statist policies. For example, an economic crisis made cuts in government spending, privatization of government operations, and the repeal of suffocating regulations politically possible in Argentina, Australia, Chile, Mexico, Spain, Turkey, and other countries during the 1980s. An economic crisis set the

stage for Margaret Thatcher in Britain and Ronald Reagan in America.

A model of freedom is tremendously important. Reagan drew inspiration from Thatcher who had become Prime Minister about a year before he was elected President, and she, in turn, could point to his successes as she charted the liberalization of Britain.

Although Hong Kong is tiny, its phenomenal success has had an electrifying impact throughout Asia. People could get on an airplane and see for themselves how well free markets work.

New Zealand has swept away its welfare state—taxes, subsidies, everything—and embraced American-style individualism. Now they have one of the world's fastest growing economies.

***The Freeman:*** Are you pessimistic or optimistic about the prospects for liberty in America?

**Johnson:** During the past couple decades, more people have become aware of the government problem. There's a sense of danger throughout society. Both main parties are aware of it—to the extent that President Clinton, in his last State of the Union address, found it politically expedient to declare that the era of big government was over. The media seem to be more skeptical about government. It's a heartening advance that people are no longer shutting their eyes to the problem. I expect people will begin to tackle it in the early years of the twenty-first century.

***The Freeman:*** Thanks very much. □



# How Walter Turnbull Inspires Self-Help at the Boys Choir of Harlem

by Marisa Manley

**T**he Boys Choir of Harlem helps renew the American dream. The boys are poor. They're menaced by gangs and tempted by drugs. Three-quarters come from broken homes. Reportedly over 70 percent of neighborhood teenagers drop out of high school, yet 98 percent of Boys Choir of Harlem members graduate from college. The more than 1,000 alumni have gone on to successful careers as entrepreneurs, ministers, teachers, and, naturally, musicians.

This seeming miracle began as the vision of Walter Turnbull, 51, a burly, bespectacled man who founded the Boys Choir of Harlem more than a quarter-century ago and remains its guiding spirit today. "I simply wanted to share the joy of music with African-American children," he explains. "It has the kind of power to lift people above any particular circumstance and inspire the heart. Music is very magical, able to transform children with no more than lint in their pockets and honey in their throats into grand performers on the world stage."

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Turnbull's boys delight audiences with a cosmopolitan repertoire ranging from songs by such classical composers as Bach, Brahms, Handel, Haydn, and Mozart to works of modern classicists like Britten, jazz immortals like Joplin, Gershwin, and Ellington, plus pop tunes and spirituals. The Boys Choir of Harlem gives about 100 concerts every year.

They have performed in concert halls around the world—some 20 countries all together. They appeared on Broadway, in the White House, at London's Albert Hall, and Tokyo's Bukodan. They performed on soundtracks for popular movies like *Glory* (1989), and they heralded the grand opening of the Disney movie *Pocahontas* (1995). They have performed as background vocalists and featured artists on a variety of albums, including *Pavarotti in Central Park* and *Michael Crawford Performs Andrew Lloyd Webber*, among others. Last year, the Boys Choir of Harlem produced their first solo album, *A Song of Hope*.

As CBS-TV's *60 Minutes* filmed a segment on the Boys Choir of Harlem, correspondent Morley Safer asked Turnbull, "What makes your kids different from the other kids that we read about, the ones that go out and assault people and use drugs?"