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Moral Frontiers

American National Character and the Future of Liberty

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The American experiment is well understood as a love story, a moral commitment between the people and the government. In its original formulation, the people and the political union are wedded to each other with mutual expectations of faithfulness. The contemporary problem is the abandonment of the idea of consent as fundamental to political legitimacy and in the place of consent the substitution of a welfare or enjoyment model of political legitimacy. This neo-progressivism is formulated specifically to replace consent—or the recognition of individual and collective agency as a legitimizing function—with the welfare model that holds that states are legitimate to the degree that governments extend enjoyments rather than to the extent that they are obedient to the commands of their citizens. The existence of the moral frontier—the need for ongoing moral commitment—is a recurring phenomenon and not a new one. To that end, moral persuasion remains the fundamental tool, and wise statesmanship remains the best hope. As George Washington experienced it, the American love story was a love of justice—a story of Americans asserting themselves with expectations of justice in America's dealings. The future of liberty thus depends on American national character, and whether it sustains a single-minded commitment to America as a substantive moral expression.

Introduction: America's Quest for National Character

America is a love story, and every true love story is a moral commitment. What is wonderful about true love is the way it expresses that moral commitment. Every lover expects her beloved to be just—not only with her but in all his dealings—

while the beloved affords the lover certain liberties. The final act of justice is the beloved's trust that the lover will make good and faithful use of her liberty.

To be more prosaic, let us say that the people and the political union are wedded to each other with mutual expectations of faithfulness. This is an odd expression, and it will become apparent as such once one considers the alternative possibility—that the people are mutually committed to one another, and the political union derives from that collective identification. The formulation I have preferred, therefore, means that America is a chosen nation, and as such, the substantial meaning of the choice defines the relationship. The people have made a moral commitment to the choice itself and not merely to one another. It is at least true that the beloved America of the eighteenth century was a substantive choice. That choice is captured in the Declaration of Independence that "imposes moral persuasion as the only legitimate grounds of polity … and … in turn, makes that governance the comprehensive moral foundation of political life."[1] If by the end of the twentieth century it had turned into an unlovable America, we would have to account for the alienation of affection. Because the substantive choice is insusceptible to change, we would have to see a change in the people pledged to that moral commitment.[2]

The American love story began with the Declaration of Independence; it began to take decisive shape in 1783 when George Washington said, "we have now a national character to establish."[3] Washington implied that the lovers now had to prove themselves worthy of the beloved. The idea, therefore, was that in the decades—indeed, centuries—after the work of building a lasting union was to take place. Nevertheless, 110 years after Washington wrote those words, Frederick Jackson Turner published "The Significance of the Frontier in American History" and wrote these words: "to the frontier the American intellect owes its striking characteristics … coarseness and strength combined with acuteness and inquisitiveness; that practical, inventive turn of mind … that dominant individualism, working for good and for evil, and withal that buoyancy and exuberance which comes with freedom."[4]

Missing in this is the beloved object of all that creative energy. Turner identified the closing of the geographical frontier as a watershed for national character. In the 110 years since, we have observed that Washington's project could not be contained in limned geographic descriptions, for we have struggled to define America, let alone our relationship to it. Have we, then, a national character? If we do, is it a lover of liberty?

Turner and the Neo-Progressives

Turner's thesis was promptly embraced by the neo-progressives, who sought a new account of America as the foundation for shaping policy in the nation. Franklin Delano Roosevelt encapsulated that process in the 1932 presidential campaign. He summarized the history leading to the close of the frontier and the challenges that remained:

> So began, in American political life, the new day, the day of the individual against the system, the day in which individualism was made the great watchword in American life. The happiest of economic conditions made that day long and splendid. On the Western frontier, land was substantially free. No one, who did not shirk the task of earning a living was entirely without opportunity to do so.… At the very worst there was always the possibility of climbing into a covered wagon and moving West, where the untilled prairies afforded a haven for men to whom the East did not provide a place…. We can now see that the turn of the tide came with the turn of the century. We were reaching our last frontier; there was no more free land and our industrial combinations had become great uncontrolled and irresponsible units of power within the state.… Faith in America, faith in our tradition of personal responsibility, faith in our institutions, faith in ourselves demands that we recognize the new terms of the old social contract.[5]

The original form of this individualism argument appeared in the analysis of Alexis de Tocqueville who described it as an inward turning that shrinks public space and leaves the citizen at home only within "the circle of family and friends."[6] That view seems the predecessor to the contemporary reading of a society in which people adapt the tools of modern communication to build cocoons of like-minded discourse that foreclose the likelihood of consensus-forming accommodation to difference.

That is at least the way that Turner prophetically read the history: "American social development has been continually beginning over again on the frontier. This perennial rebirth, this fluidity of American life, this expansion westward with its new opportunities, its continuous touch with the simplicity of primitive society, furnish the forces dominating American character."[7] He continued,

> But the most important effect of the frontier has been in the promotion of democracy here and in Europe. As has been indicated, the frontier is productive of individualism. Complex society is precipitated by the wilderness into a kind of primitive organization based on the family. *The tendency is anti-social.* It produces antipathy to control, and particularly to any direct control.

> The tax-gatherer is viewed as a representative of oppression.… [T]he frontier conditions prevalent in the colonies are important factors in the explanation of the American Revolution, where individual liberty was sometimes confused with the absence of all effective government.[8]

He concluded, "And now, four centuries from the discovery of America, at the end of a hundred years of life under the Constitution, the frontier has gone, and with its going has closed the first period of American history."[9]

That first period of our history, according to Turner, was one in which "the ideals of equality, freedom of opportunity, faith in the common man" were deep rooted throughout the Middle West and eventually transmitted through the western frontiers.[10] "The frontier stage, through which each portion passed, left abiding traces on the older, as well as on the newer, areas of the province. Nor were these ideals limited to the Native American settlers: Germans and Scandinavians who poured into the Middle West sought the country with like hopes and like faith."[11] These transformative effects colored the democracy peculiar to the West. "The peculiar democracy of the frontier has passed away with the conditions that produced it; but the democratic aspirations remain. They are held with passionate determination," writes Turner.[12] "The United States is unique in the extent to which the individual has been given an open field, unchecked by restraints of an old social order, or of scientific administration of government."[13]

What this argument means is that the American national character derived mainly from the interaction of lives lived under the press of necessity in the context of parsimonious participation by government. Beyond highways and rudimentary defense installations, the radical democrat of the frontier hardly knew the government existed. What that hardy soul fell in love with was the strength of his own arms. Benign neglect, on this theory, was mistaken for liberty in society. In a more advanced state, approximating the conditions of the Eastern states, this would not avail. Woodrow Wilson drew the conclusion in his work on constitutional government: "Political liberty consists in the best practicable adjustment between the power of the government and the privilege of the individual; … the freedom to alter the adjustment is as important as the adjustment itself for the ease and progress of affairs and the contentment of the citizen."[14] Political liberty became a privilege, or a concession, granted by government rather than a right to be claimed against government.

From the closing of the frontier, neo-progresssives derived problematic concepts not only of liberty but also of what Turner called "scientific administration of government."[15] A liberty fostered by circumstances rather than national character has only as much influence as the circumstances afford. Moreover, the

confusion extended to the understanding of America's place in the world and the landscape of human rights. The emphasis shifted decisively from our relationship with the beloved country to our relationships among ourselves and with others globally—relationships mediated by government.

We have a problem. When we say "we," we mean the citizens of the United States and more particularly those who undertake systematically to explain what constitutes us as citizens or a people in the United States. The intuitive sense is scarcely more than a vague, geographic sensibility, while a more substantive construction now eludes us almost completely. The problem resides in confusion as to whether what constitutes us as a people is a particular moral or political conformation or rather some less deliberate yet nonetheless evident cultural expression. The problem is that we have become clumsy about describing ourselves as a people in terms of what used to be called "national character." To some, if not many, the idea of character is a loaded term, implying the development of some specific moral or ethical expression that operates as a divisor separating those attaining the warranted degree of expression from other persons in the United States or elsewhere. Nevertheless, we find it awkward and difficult to speak of our collective existence in any meaningful sense independently of some such distinguishing function. Our problem, then, is that we desire to be a people but hesitate to be a chosen people. A "nation of immigrants," we like to say, as if to imply that the immigrants always remain immigrants and never become Americans! Common sense reprehends the very idea, while common practice relies on it in our most collective judgments.

The Meaning of Neo-Progressivism

The problem we have did not emerge in an evolutionary manner as a natural outgrowth of political practice and development. Instead, it derived from a deliberate turning away from the reflexive forms of political discussion that characterized political deliberation in the early United States. The surest demonstration of this particular turning point or conversion would carry us through a fairly long survey of the discourse employed by a long series of statesmen and public intellectuals from the end of the nineteenth century to the present era. Fortunately, we can foreshorten that process by relying on the authority of a highly polished and intelligent summary by analysts who take it as their calling to cement the continuing influence of the contemporary progressive conversion in United States politics. Those are the representatives of the neo-progressive option presented through the work of the Center for American Progress (CAP). They have published an incredible statement of the meaning of progressivism

that serves the dual purpose of detailing the agenda that is fundamental to neo-progressivism while at the same time revealing in the most dramatic fashion that element of the original progressive discourse that has been jettisoned in order to accomplish the conversion.

To sum up the specific difficulty, and then next to show in detail how it comes to light, we may say at once that the problem is the abandonment of the idea of consent as fundamental to political legitimacy and in the place of consent the substitution of a welfare or enjoyment model of political legitimacy. This claim will not be immediately apparent. In order to discover its accuracy, however, one needs only to invoke the true and correct understanding of the Declaration of Independence and then to interrogate the apology for neo-progressivism on the basis of the Declaration. What will emerge is a clear understanding that neo-progressivism is formulated specifically to replace consent—or the recognition of individual and collective agency as a legitimizing function—with the welfare model, which holds that states are legitimate to the degree that governments extend enjoyments rather than to the extent that they are obedient to the commands of their citizens.

Let us review the argument from the Center for American Progress.

Note that the term *consent* appears only once in the entire document, and then only in the appendix that reprints the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR). Moreover, it is instructive that it appears in the document where it does: namely, defining the marriage relationship, or the confined sphere of individual agency in the new order.[16] At the same time, every discussion of political authority treats government as *sui generis* and citizens under government as dependent.[17] "The will of the people shall be the basis of authority of government" does not suggest that the government originates in the consent of the governed, for the government's "authority" is a thing apart from the existence of the government. The so-called will of the people has a functional relationship in the operation of the government, without for all that constituting the "that without which" the government cannot legitimately exist. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, in sum, demotes those natural rights deriving from "the laws of nature and of nature's God" that are the hallmark of the Declaration of Independence to rights of enjoyment as opposed to agency: "the right to a standard of living … and security" as opposed to "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness."

Similarly, the CAP statement demotes the natural "right to life" to a "civil right" that is "predicated on access to the bare minimum life-sustaining resources."[18] The best context in which to view this dramatic turn is in light of James Wilson's earlier definition of "civil rights," namely, rights "which are acquired. [The citizen] is entitled to the honest administration of the government in general: he is entitled,

in particular, to the impartial administration of justice."[19] This account accords well with the movement and meaning of the Declaration of Independence, which derives civil rights from "just powers of government" that in turn derive from "the consent of the governed." In other words, the Declaration distinguishes the natural rights antecedent to every government and the resultant civil rights that restrain legitimate governments to observing and protecting those natural rights. By insisting on the civil rights while remaining silent on natural rights, the CAP statement effectively denies the foundations of the Declaration of Independence.

The CAP statement takes this bold position (although Woodrow Wilson enunciated it a hundred years before) for the plain and compelling reason that it believes the political circumstances of the world have so changed as to render inadequate any purely national defense of natural rights. The Bill of Rights accordingly must yield to a "second bill of rights" that embraces the rights of humanity not abstractly but as a concrete political objective. This may first seem belied by the express statement in the CAP report:

> The United States was founded on the *notion* that government should protect civil and political rights *at all costs*. These unalienable rights are the "truths" that the founding fathers held to be "self-evident" in the Declaration of Independence, that "all Men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness." The Bill of Rights is a classic list of these guarantees of freedom and equal treatment *under the law*.[20]

Note, however, that the rights enumerated in the Bill of Rights of the U.S. Constitution were not considered to be "guarantees of free and equal treatment under the law" but, rather, restraints upon government *above* the law! Thus, what Abraham Lincoln took to be a "standard maxim of a free society" is to CAP only a "notion that government should protect civil and political rights" by any means necessary. Or, still more clearly, unlimited government power is required to effectuate a *notion* of civil rights.

That is the reason that

> American progressives have historically understood that political freedoms are empty vessels in the absence of basic, life-sustaining resources. People who lack basic access to food, shelter, health care, or education cannot fully or even partially *enjoy* these freedoms. Economic disparities and social discrimination have relegated large swaths of the population to lives of poverty.[21]

To have a right, on this account, is to *enjoy* substantively whatever is denoted by the right. A right to life predicates the enjoyment of the means of living (here

delineated as covering most basic human activity: food, shelter, health care, education). Accordingly, the concept of rights employed by neo-progressives, and civil rights in particular, is the concept of human welfare or flourishing. It is for this reason that we must distinguish the neo-progressives from the original progressives (for so did George Washington denominate himself) whose focus in the Declaration of Independence lay squarely on individual and collective agency and responsibility for human welfare. Government protected the pursuit of happiness, precisely in the form of securing individual and collective agency and responsibility.

What this means, in sum, is that neo-progressives substituted government for America, while the people fell in love not with government but with America. America is a way of life, not a government. Government is merely America's personal valet.

In the neo-progressive model, agency belongs to the government and not to the people. Accordingly, there is less need to defend the efficacy of individual and collective agency, for the people are the beneficiaries rather than the performers of civil rights. In fact, the CAP statement maintains, "throughout the 19th and 20th centuries" neo-progressive leaders sought primarily to advance a policy "of meeting basic economic and social needs, which are necessary if the principles *behind* the Bill of Rights are to be *realized*."[22] The twenty-first-century progeny of these neo-progressives regard this project as elaborating a "Second Bill of Rights."[23]

Let us be clear: What matters to the neo-progressives is to attain not the surface guarantees of the Bill of Rights but what lies "behind the Bill of Rights." The equal and impartial administration of justice, for example, is realized not in procedures of fairness but in outcomes that may be empirically described as fair. All of this re-rendering of the founding of the United States takes place, as previously suggested, in a new context in which human rights are to be protected, not for this or that particular people, but, rather, for people in general; for people globally. If this attainment is achievable and understandable only in the context of empirically describable outcomes, then it follows that the idea of human rights for the neo-progressive is, rather, a "that toward which" we strive as opposed to a "that without which" all striving is illegitimate.

Although this argument could have been adduced from the principles of Woodrow Wilson or Franklin Roosevelt or Jimmy Carter or Barack Obama, the CAP statement preferred to pose it as deriving from the creation of the United Nations and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. As it is put in the executive summary:

> A new global consensus emerged after the world collapsed into chaos, aggression, and mass slaughter during World Wars I and II that lasting peace required the protection of individual rights and freedoms in all countries.… Although the work of securing true liberty and equality for all presents numerous diplomatic, humanitarian, and military difficulties, it remains the duty of progressives to defend these ideals and to help turn them into reality for people everywhere.[24]

Moreover,

> Progressives have argued for years that the United States' own security interests are better met by relying upon global political consensus, international human rights precedents, and American human rights laws in response to such national security threats.[25]

Nor is the justification for this demand purely tactical or prudential, for the neo-progressives maintain that "human rights are derived in part from the consensus of the international community."[26] This is to say, the opinion of international policymakers is the source of rights in place of that rational opinion that confirms a correct identification of human rights. The latter, of course, was the standard enunciated in the Declaration of Independence when its framers submitted facts "to a candid world" for whose opinions they had "a decent respect." A global political consensus bespeaks, rather, a global or international authority as the legitimate exponent and responsible agent that realizes human rights.[27] That is an evolving standard, which CAP regards as a "more flexible approach to human rights [that] offers the possibility of reconciling new understandings of human rights with a new and changing world."[28]

Naturally, there must follow from the redefinition of civil rights a redefinition of state sovereignty because the new order must project "the good governance values that precipitated the founding of the UDHR … based on progressive commitments to dignified life, liberty, and security for all people across the globe, not on the supremacy of state powers."[29] Thus "the separate and equal station to which the laws of nature and of nature's God," entitled the American revolutionaries, ceases to be the foundation for a guarantee of human rights in the eyes of neo-progressives. Given that the realization of human rights depends on their global realization, there can no longer be a defense of the notion that one people might realize what other peoples must perforce live without.

> Civil and political rights include the rights to life, liberty, freedom of association, and fair and equal treatment under the law. Economic, social, and cultural rights are made up of such fundamental needs as the right to food, decent living conditions, education, and basic health care. Together, these two sets of

> rights make up the "universal, indivisible and interdependent and interrelated" list of *basic human rights entitlements* recognized under international law.[30]

We have completed the portrait. Rights that US citizens have long celebrated as the source of their liberties have been reconstituted as an obligation to bring not liberty but welfare entitlements to the people of the globe. On those terms, America is not beloved as a substantive moral commitment. It is at best a useful tool to seek a more remote goal. America cannot be the object of our affection when global happiness hangs in the balance. Neither, therefore, can national character describe our moral attainments or commitments. What, then, becomes of liberty, when detached from national character?

The Neo-Progressive Transformation of Liberty

Carl Scott recently published an intelligent discussion of the "five meanings of liberty," and we can discover in that discussion the missing link in these developments—namely, the moral imperatives present at the outset of the American love story. He identified "natural rights liberty," "community self-governance" liberty, "economic-autonomy liberty," "social justice" liberty, and "personal autonomy liberty" as the five concepts.[31] Next, he explained how dominant neo-progressive thought had compressed the five into the last two as the meaningful political or policy concepts of liberty. This makes sense of the contemporary discourse, which treats liberty as enjoyment rather than as moral agency. However, this fivefold typology does not well capture the founding meaning of liberty, which, far from invoking morally indifferent personal autonomy, embraced self-government as a personal moral obligation rather than as a collective practice. The protection of natural rights was indeed the protection of the right of self-government or consent, and it is in that light alone that the right to liberty leads to a right of revolution. None of Scott's five meanings taken alone can rationally ground the right of revolution, which reveals their inadequacy as explanations of liberty, however ably they characterize contemporary discourse. But Scott captures eloquently the neo-progressive transformation that led to obscuring the right of revolution and, hence, the true understanding of liberty:

> What the Progressives and the New Deal liberals feared, however, was that older American dogmas would keep the nation's democracy from directing its own social development as they envisioned. They found two dogmas particularly regrettable. The first was what they broadly denounced as individualism, by which they basically meant economic-autonomy liberty. Progressives traced the roots of this individualism to the founding itself, but many of them put

> more of the blame upon economic theories of later origin. Either way, while such individualism had been a useful creed for pioneer farmers and small-town merchants to hold, the modern economy was increasingly coming to be divided into corporations and wage-earners. There was no longer a frontier where one could carve out property by mixing one's labor into the land in the manner extolled by Lockean theory. Thus, belief in inviolable individual rights, and particularly the rights to contract and use property freely, actually served to further entrench the power of corporations against that of the individual.[32]

How this cashes out in our time is that we experience a crabbed politics in which claims of moral rights are translatable only as claims for governmental intervention rather than as assertions of unalienable rights. This was evident decades ago in the campaign for a school prayer amendment. It is more evident today in the campaign to defend "traditional marriage" through governmental recognition. Where a robust assertion of rights would withdraw from all recognition of state power in this regard, a more tenuous claim of rights as government privileges petitions for political recognition. Yet nothing could be clearer than that the sure path to defend holy matrimony (what, after all, is traditional marriage among eons of various traditions?) is by severing all connection with the state in relation to it. The temptation of Philadelphia Archbishop Charles Chaput to surrender his civil license is the correct response to state-enforced same-sex marriage.[33] I could even imagine public protests of citizen couples burning their marriage licenses on courthouse steps to reclaim the moral high ground in defense of holy matrimony.

The liberty that drives the American love story derives from self-government as present at the founding, not as a communitarian value but as a core moral theory positioning the individual to act as a rights-bearing agent. Therefore, it is out of sync with what Scott identifies as central today: "It has also become clear that many Americans now regard this individual-autonomy notion of liberty as the central feature of our democratic heritage."[34] To every appearance, therefore, moral frontiers have emerged, at which we undergo character-structuring influences no less dramatic than those heretofore attributed to geographic frontiers. Those moral frontiers—decision points at which Americans must rely on themselves and not on government to steer their course—may be variously accounted for. In the main, though, we may safely affirm that they have always been present. In the first century under the Constitution, it was not so much the primitive wilderness that shaped national character as the fact that the hardy pioneers always had hard-on-their-heels parsons and educators determined to wield moral influence. If they were self-reliant individualists, it was as much because they accepted responsibilities as because they were left to their own devices.

In this sense, therefore, the existence of the moral frontier is a recurring phenomenon and not a new one. It colored the American love story through the end of slavery and Lincoln's helmsmanship. Can it also see Americans through the era of moral and/or cultural disintegration we now observe? To some, the upsurge in cultural variation is critical. Samuel P. Huntington counted it as posing the potential end of American history.[35] He meant that national character has undergone irreversible changes under the pressures to integrate widely varying cultural perspectives. But is that so? It is easy to mistake a moment of trenchant political or policy decision, in which compromise is the essence of prudential management, with an inflection point in which adherence to an absolute moral criterion is essential. It may be difficult, as a matter of practice, to accommodate enormous numbers of immigrants, but that does not rule out a compromise bottomed on fundamental terms of justice and thus coherent with the American love story.

It seems rather that what would mortally injure American liberty would be such an inflection point as one in which citizens surrendered fundamental moral principle instead of resisting its abandonment. To that end, moral persuasion remains the fundamental tool, and wise statesmanship remains the best hope. We might better seek guidance for such purposes at a greater remove from our felt necessities, and such a guide is Xenophon's Agesilaus (whose name we may take to mean, "the people's guide").

Agesilaus as Guide to National Character

Xenophon's *Agesilaus* celebrates a monarch and serves as an example of possible interpretations of the significance of national character. Agesilaus formed "his soul inviolable against the assaults of riches, pleasures, fears."[36] Xenophon distinguished Agesilaus's justice, courage (wisdom), and moderation or continence from the virtues of piety and patriotism. By bringing the reach of the former virtues within range of a monarch's will, Xenophon elevated them, at least insofar as what is both good for us and accessible to us is higher than what is merely good. Agesilaus put his virtues to good use, or, properly, fared well on account of his virtues; they show the political image of a Socrates.[37] Xenophon revived the opening question of the work, concluding in chapter 10 that Agesilaus is rightly believed to be a completely good man.[38] The closing chapter, the summary, completed the account of that complete goodness. He was in awe of the gods (even among the enemies) and in awe of what gods could do for men. Hence, his piety. After the first half of the summary, the gods vanish. From paragraph 9 to

the end, the reader revels in the man the monarch, for whom the good he could himself do; the moral commitment was an obsession.

Xenophon's praise of Agesilaus takes seriously Agesilaus's purported concern for the common good. A twentieth-century Xenophon, by contrast, would have interpreted these same characteristics in the light of a mere attempt to gain influence over others for the sake of some hidden agenda. Why, then, should we afford old-fashioned Xenophon's naïveté any credibility? If we look again, we will note that old-fashioned Xenophon was not uncritical. In chapter 2, he allowed that there might be some other way in which one could find fault with Agesilaus's apparently confusing the common good of Sparta (a national good) and the common good of Greece (a transnational good). Yet, he discerned an ultimate objective that he judged to be the controlling factor in Agesilaus's mind and that, in any case, serves to bring us to reflect on the virtue and paradox of friendship as the aim of politics. Friendship as an end both necessitates *and* undermines justice. Defined by Aristotle as the preference of another's good, friendship in its ideal expression is the relationship among all citizens and is something to be aimed at in legal arrangements. However, the stronger that passion the more possible it is that someone might prefer *a* friend's good to the city's good. (Unlike Xenophon, Plutarch thought Agesilaus all too prone to that sin.) Additionally, there is a bigger problem to which Xenophon points in chapter 7:

> Again, when some Corinthian exiles informed him that their city was ripe for surrender, and showed him the engines by which they were confident they would take the walls, he refused to make the assault, saying that Hellene cities ought not to be reduced to slavery, but brought back to a better mind, and added, "For if we lop off our offending members, haply we may deprive ourselves of the means to master the barbarian."
>
> Again, if it is a sacred duty to hate the Persian, who of old set out on a campaign to enslave Hellas; the Persian, who to-day makes alliance with *these* (no matter to him which the party, provided it will help him to work the greater mischief); or gives presents to *those* (who will take them and do the greatest harm to his foes the Hellenes); or else concocts a peace that shall presently involve us in internecine war, as he anticipates:—but why dwell on facts so patent?—I ask, did ever Hellene before Agesilaus so enter heart and soul upon his duty; whether it were to help some tribe to throw off the Persian yoke, or to save from destruction a revolted district, or if nothing else, at any rate to saddle the Persian with such troubles of his own that he should cease to trouble Hellas? An ardent hater of Persia surely was he, who, when his own country was at war with Hellenes, did not neglect the common good of Hellas.[39]

Here, Xenophon showed Agesilaus's elevation of soul by revealing that he could consider the national good of Sparta as compatible with the good of other peoples. The problem of every regime, the necessity of exclusivity, is overcome by a large ability to relate the end of the city to the human end (true to the wildest imaginings of Socrates). It is the political philosopher, Xenophon, who enables us to consider this question in a way that is far more fruitful than merely to assume universality or common humanity.

Conclusion: America's Agesilaus

With this example in mind, let us return to America's Agesilaus, George Washington. His national character project spoke not only of the American character to be established. In the letter to Theodorick Bland he added, "it is of the utmost importance to stamp favourable impressions upon [our national character]; let justice then be one of its characteristics, and gratitude another."[40] In the "Circular Address," he also described the context in which that character was to be established and to serve as a guarantor for liberty and self-government. That context was the expectation of justice. He phrased it thus:

> The path of our duty is plain before us; honesty will be found on every experiment to be the best and only true policy; let us then as a Nation be just; … let an attention to the chearfull performance of their proper business, as Individuals, and as members of Society, be earnestly inculcated on the Citizens of America, then will they strengthen the hands of Government, and be happy under its protection: every one will enjoy the fruit of his labours; everyone will enjoy his own acquisitions without molestation and without danger. *In this state of absolute freedom and perfect security*, who will grudge to yield a very little of his property to support the common interest of Society, and insure the protection of Government?[41]

Washington famously closed the "Circular Address" with a tacit quotation from Micah 6:8:

> I now make it my earnest prayer that God would … be pleased to dispose us all, to do Justice, to love mercy, and to demean ourselves with that Charity, humility and pacific temper of mind, which were the Characteristicks of the Divine Author of our blessed Religion, and without an humble imitation of whose examples in these things, we can never hope to be a happy Nation.[42]

As Washington experienced it, the American love story was a love of justice—a story of Americans asserting themselves with expectations of justice in

America's dealings. He made the future of the country to depend on the conduct of its people, the use of whose liberty would determine how far the nation could remain faithful. Something of the same order of consideration was still present in 1964, when Ronald Reagan spoke of the "war" against communism and said: "if we … lose this way of freedom of ours, history will record with the greatest astonishment that those who had the most to lose did the least to prevent its happening."[43] That sentiment is exactly what Abraham Lincoln meant when he declared in his 1854 Peoria Speech "that if there is anything which it is the duty of the whole people to never intrust to any hands but their own, that thing is the preservation and perpetuity of their own liberties and institutions."[44]

After the passage of more than two centuries, a consensus of the best has emerged: The future of liberty depends on American national character and whether it sustains a single-minded commitment to America as a substantive moral expression. We will see a cloudless future for liberty when we see Americans falling in love again.

Notes

1. W. B. Allen, "Machiavelli and Modernity," in Niccolo Machiavelli, *The Prince*, trans. Angelo Codevilla (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), 113.

2. Think of the "Pledge of Allegiance": "one nation, under God, indivisible [undivorceable?], with liberty and justice for all."

3. George Washington to Theodorick Bland, Newburgh, April 4, 1783, in *George Washington: A Collection*, ed. W. B. Allen (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1988), 231. Cf. also George Washington, "Circular to the States," Newburgh, June 14, 1783, in *George Washington*, ed. Allen, 241: "This is the time of their [the United States] political probation … this is the moment to establish or ruin their national character forever."

4. Frederick Jackson Turner, "The Significance of the Frontier in American History," in *The Frontier in American History* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1921), 37.

5. Franklin Delano Roosevelt, "Campaign Address on Progressive Government at the Commonwealth Club in San Francisco, California," September 23, 1932, appearing as "Reappraisal of Values" and introduction to *Looking Forward*, by Franklin D. Roosevelt (1933; repr., New York: Touchstone, 2009), 6–7, 10, xiii.

6. Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (New York: The Liberty of America, 2004), 585.

7. Turner, "The Significance of the Frontier," 2–3.

8. Turner, "The Significance of the Frontier," 30.

9. Turner, "The Significance of the Frontier," 38. While the first period of our history was declared closed by Turner, the second or global period was declared closed by Rabbi Pruzansky following the 2012 election:

> The American empire began to decline in 2007, and the deterioration has been exacerbated in the last five years. This election only hastens that decline. Society is permeated with sloth, greed, envy and materialistic excess. It has lost its moorings and its moral foundations. The takers outnumber the givers, and that will only increase in years to come. Across the world, America under Bush was feared but not respected. Under Obama, America is neither feared nor respected. Radical Islam has had a banner four years under Obama, and its prospects for future growth look excellent. The "Occupy" riots across this country in the last two years were mere dress rehearsals for what lies ahead—years of unrest sparked by the increasing discontent of the unsuccessful who want to seize the fruits and the bounty of the successful, and do not appreciate the slow pace of redistribution.
>
> Two bright sides: Notwithstanding the election results, I arose this morning, went to shul, davened and learned Torah afterwards. That is our reality, and that trumps all other events. Our relationship with G-d matters more than our relationship with any politician, R or D. And, notwithstanding the problems in Israel, it is time for Jews to go home, to Israel. We have about a decade, perhaps 15 years, to leave with dignity and without stress. Thinking that it will always be because it always was has been a repetitive and deadly Jewish mistake. America was always the land from which "positive" aliya came—Jews leaving on their own, and not fleeing a dire situation. But that can also change. The increased aliya in the last few years is partly attributable to young people fleeing the high cost of Jewish living in America. Those costs will only increase in the coming years. We should draw the appropriate conclusions.
>
> If this election proves one thing, it is that the Old America is gone. And, sad for the world, it is not coming back."

See Rabbi Steven Pruzansky, "Why Romney Didn't Get Enough Votes to Win," *Arutz Sheva*, November 13, 2012, http://www.israelnationalnews.com/Articles/Article.aspx/12436#.VqmVH7IrKUk.

10. Turner, "The Middle West," in *The Frontier in American History* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1921), 155.

11. Turner, "The Middle West," 155.

12. Turner, "The Middle West," 155.

13. Turner, "The Problem of the West," in *The Frontier in American History* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1921), 212–13.

14. Woodrow Wilson, "What Is Constitutional Government?" in *Constitutional Government in the United States* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1908), 5.

15. Turner, "The Problem of the West," 213.

16. Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Article 16:

    (1) Men and women of full age, without any limitation due to race, nationality or religion, have the right to marry and to found a family. They are entitled to equal rights as to marriage, during marriage and at its dissolution.

    (2) Marriage shall be entered into only with the free and full consent of the intending spouses.

17. Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Article 21:

    (1) Everyone has the right to take part in the government of his country, directly or through freely chosen representatives.

    (2) Everyone has the right of equal access to public service in his country.

    (3) The will of the people shall be the basis of the authority of government; this will shall be expressed in periodic and genuine elections which shall be by universal and equal suffrage and shall be held by secret vote or by equivalent free voting procedures.

    Article 22:

    Everyone, as a member of society, has the right to social security and is entitled to realization, through national effort and international co-operation and in accordance with the organization and resources of each State, of the economic, social and cultural rights indispensable for his dignity and the free development of his personality.

18. John Halpin, William Schulz, and Sarah Dreier, "Universal Human Rights in Progressive Thought and Politics: Part Four of the Progressive Tradition Series," Center for American Progress, October 2010, https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/progressive-movement/report/2010/10/08/8491/universal-human-rights-in-progressive-thought-and-politics/, 16.

19. James Wilson, *The Works of James Wilson*, ed. James DeWitt Andrews (Chicago: Callaghan and Company, 1896), 426. This account transcends questions of identity and culture to make rights paramount. Wilson, of course, was a member of the Constitutional Convention of the United States in 1787 and was also on the first Supreme Court under the Constitution.

20. Halpin, Schulz, and Dreier, "Universal Human Rights," 16, emphasis added.

21. Halpin, Schulz, and Dreier, "Universal Human Rights," 15, emphasis added.

22. Halpin, Schulz, and Dreier, "Universal Human Rights," 23, emphasis added.

23. Halpin, Schulz, and Dreier, "Universal Human Rights," 16.

24. Halpin, Schulz, and Dreier, "Universal Human Rights," 2–3.

25. Halpin, Schulz, and Dreier, "Universal Human Rights," 11.

26. Halpin, Schulz, and Dreier, "Universal Human Rights," 12.

27. "This more flexible approach to human rights offers the possibility of reconciling new understandings of human rights with a new and changing world.… Policymakers and judges at all levels of domestic lawmaking have generally resisted making international law enforceable in American courts and disputes, drawing exclusive authority instead from the U.S. Constitution"—a thing to be reprehended and not praised by neo-progressives. See Halpin, Schulz, and Dreier, "Universal Human Rights," 11–12.

28. Halpin, Schulz, and Dreier, "Universal Human Rights," 12.

29. Halpin, Schulz, and Dreier, "Universal Human Rights," 14.

30. Halpin, Schulz, and Dreier, "Universal Human Rights," 15.

31. See Carl Eric Scott, "The Five Conceptions of American Liberty," *National Affairs* (Summer 2014): 164–83.

32. Scott, "The Five Conceptions," 170.

33. David Gibson, "Archbishop Chaput blasts Vatican debate on family, says 'confusion is of the devil,'" *National Catholic Reporter*, October 21, 2014, http://ncronline.org/news/faith-parish/archbishop-chaput-blasts-vatican-debate-family-says-confusion-devil.

34. Scott, "The Five Conceptions," 173.

35. Samuel P. Huntington, "If Not Civilizations, What? Paradigms of the Post-Cold War World," *Foreign Affairs* (November-December 1993): 186–94, esp. 190:

> The United States is becoming increasingly diverse ethnically and racially. The Census Bureau estimates that by 2050 the American population will be 23 percent Hispanic, 16 percent black and 10 percent Asian-American. In the past the United States has successfully absorbed millions of immigrants from scores of countries because they adapted to the prevailing European culture and enthusiastically embraced the American Creed of liberty, equality, individualism, democracy. Will this pattern continue to prevail as 50 percent of the population becomes Hispanic or nonwhite? Will the new immigrants be assimilated into the hitherto dominant European culture of the United States? If they are not, if the United States becomes truly multicultural and pervaded with an internal clash of civilizations, will it survive as a liberal democracy? The political identity of the United States is rooted in the principles articulated in its founding documents. Will the de-Westernization of the United States, if it occurs, also mean its de-Americanization? If it does and Americans cease to adhere to their liberal

democratic and European-rooted political ideology, the United States as we have known it will cease to exist and will follow the other ideologically defined superpower onto the ash heap of history.

36. Xenophon, *Agesilaus*, in *The Works of Xenophon*, by Xenophon, vol. 2, trans. H. G. Dakyns (London; New York: Macmillan, 1892), 264.

37. See Xenophon, *Apology*, in *The Works of Xenophon*, by Xenophon, vol. 3, pt. 1, trans. H. G. Dakyns (London; New York: Macmillan, 1897), 185–95.

38. See Xenophon, *Agesilaus*, 266–68.

39. Xenophon, *Agesilaus*, 262.

40. Washington to "Theodorick Bland," 231.

41. Washington, "Circular Letter to the States," 244.

42. Washington, "Circular Letter to the States," 249.

43. Ronald Reagan, "A Time for Choosing," October 27, 1964, https://www.reagan.utexas.edu/archives/reference/timechoosing.html.

44. Abraham Lincoln, "Speech at Peoria, Illinois, in Reply to Senator Douglas," October 16, 1854, in *The Writings of Abraham Lincoln*, vol. 2: 1843-1858, ed. Arthur Brooks Lapsley (New York; London: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1923), 215.