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HAUNTED BY THE GREATEST GENERATION

“Man is born free, and everywhere in chains,” so wrote Jean-Jacques Rousseau in the dramatic first sentence of the first chapter of his powerfully influential treatise, *The Social Contract*. (1)

A somewhat less well-known statement, one which I ponder often, is the first sentence from his *Discourses*, “The question before me is (this): Whether the Restoration of the arts and sciences has had the effect of purifying or corrupting morals. Which side am I to take? That, gentlemen, becomes an honest man, one who is sensible of his own ignorance, and thinks himself none the worse for it.” (2.)

These two short quotes from an unusual 18th century philosopher take me to my own questions of today.

Just who are we Americans as a nation? What do we believe in and why? Where did we come from and where are we going? I doubt that most of us ask these

questions any more, not because we do not care, nor because we know the answers, but more likely, we take whatever the answers for granted, not even thinking them.

I was born in early 1937, PreWar, not a so called "war baby", but not a real part of World War II either. Not a part of the Greatest Generation. But just who were they, that Great Generation, who are the little group in my generation, and who are the War Babies? Oh, there are always differences, as there always will be, in one generation to another, but in the 20th century, I believe, a great deal more-so. The demographics of the past 100 years is much more peaks and valleys than one might expect; we had a fairly normal birth rate or population expansion from 1900 to 1930, in spite of a flu epidemic, a sharp slowdown and decline in the Depression years of 1930 thru 1940, in fact 1936 was the lowest birth rate recorded over the past 100 years, then during the war years of 1940 thru 45 also a low birth rate, followed, of course by a big increase from 1946 through 1960, the "war babies", children of soldiers returning from that world war, which war, in addition to disrupting the demography or population of the world, brought all kinds of social and geopolitical change, as wars are so apt to do.

Whether the period from 1914 thru 1952 was "one long world war" or a war in "two parts" is immaterial, as that 40 year period was a massive world-wide conflict, the first such, and, so far, the only truly world-wide war. Coming out of that era in 1945, coming home to parents, girl friends, parades, was a pretty unique group of men and women. The manner in which they carried themselves during the conflict of the war and their return home was indeed, to my way of thinking, the Greatest Generation. They were my brothers, really; I had three older half-brothers in that War; they were my heroes.

I was eight years old in 1945. I remember my dad crying when each of my older brothers came through the front door, their duffel bags on the living room floor, my younger brothers and I searching through their stuff, looking for the medals, insignias, and the few souvenirs; but my older brothers didn't talk much about the war. They were just happy to be home and to get back to school or to work. Remember the G I Bill, the temporary barracks on campus, and football as a sport.

And then, back there in the 40's, there was the economy. Recall a few simple things of that era; the United States was heavy with the Depression for most of

the 30's, the War came along in the 40's and we mobilized, we built, and we won that War. When it did end, the US was virtually the only functioning economy on the earth. However, many thought or expected a "post-war letdown" and feared for economic health. Such attitude was also exemplified in America by corporate or investor thinking; use retail as an example. The management of Sears Roebuck thought that a great boom was on the horizon, they built a Sears store on a corner in every city in the country. Their then competitor, Montgomery Ward, felt exactly the opposite, a severe recession, deflation, and economic misery were right around the corner; they didn't expand one iota! In fact, hoarded cash and "pulled in their horns." The rest is retail history; Sears went on to become the largest retailer in the country in the 50's and Montgomery Ward went down, yes, bankrupt! Parenthetically, extend the retail story a bit further from the 50's through today and it becomes even more interesting; just say or think, Sears (went bankrupt) its dominance over-taken by discounter Kmart, (it also eventually went bankrupt), Walmart (now dominant) but for how long, they must be seriously looking over their shoulder at Amazon.

But back to the greatest generation. The US economy actually boomed in the 50's and 60's. The rest of the world was in a shambles in 1945. Just bombed

out buildings, and almost world-wide. And China, although “sort of” Allied with us against the Japanese, was also devastated by the war, and then had its own internal revolution back in full swing when World War II ended. But more chaos was in store there until 1949 when the Communists led by Mao took full control of that giant country, keeping it behind a “bamboo curtain” for almost 40 years. For much of the rest of the world, along came the Marshall Plan, but with its great social and economic stimulus, came the “hammer and fist” of the Iron Curtain and NATO. The greatest generation went to school, got married, got jobs, built families, and rebuilt their lives. Their greatness was fading, with time, into a thing of the past, a legend.

Other changes were also evolving, some rather rapidly. Think for a moment about descriptive words of 60 or 70 years ago, such as Commie, Jap, white only, labor unions, Spic, non-Catholic, or non-Jewish; in one way or another, depending upon who was saying what to whom, and how these words were being used, they were pejorative. The inference was “someone not like us.” Not good Americans, not good people.

Today, these words, mixed messages as they may have been in the past, have also faded away. But not too long ago, and for exactly what reason I know not, although it might have been President Obama discussing the subject, answering a news conference question in 2009, these “excluding pejoratives” were replaced with “American Exceptionalism.” Those two words were not new, but not recently used. They are pretty clear: Americans are better, brighter, more competent and talented, than other peoples. A few years ago Vladimir Putin took a shot at this “American Exceptionalism”, saying “what in the hell does this mean, who do they think they are!”

However, the concept of American Exceptionalism has been popular on and off for many years, even going back to the Founding Fathers. “According to the late political sociologist, Seymour Martin Lipset, who was considered one of the foremost experts on the subject, America’s unique ideology can be described in five words: liberty, egalitarianism, individualism, populism, and laissez faire.” (4)

I recognize, fellow Literarians, that I am treading on some sensitive ground with these remarks, some sensitive subjects, but I feel that one must speak up if they

feel that the country they love and have defended has some things wrong or is not on the right path. Not speaking up is to be complicit and unwilling to debate for the freedoms of which we speak.

Carry this exceptionalism into today, for that matter the past decade. I have come to believe that our national religion is what we call American Democracy, not Christianity, not freedom for all religions, not equality, but Democracy. And our quest is to “make the world free for or with democracy”, exporting it to all nations, because we know what is best for them. After All, We are Exceptional!

The record over the past 70 years is not particularly good in evaluating this quest. The empirical evidence of this export taking hold, particularly in light of the national treasure of men, money, and morality which we have expended, has not been a success, nor has it earned one bit of respect. No “thank you”, just give us money and weapons and go away. As I think about this, the “thank you” is certainly not necessary, the money is corruption, and the weapons are a better killing device in the hands of our eventual enemies than they previously had.

The litany of Viet Nam in the 60's, Central and South America in the 70's, the Middle East in the 80's through the present, 14 years in Afghanistan at a cost of three trillion dollars, and none of the men and women returning home are even recognized much less cared for. There are no parades. They have not yet been referred to as the "forgotten generation" but maybe one day someone will be strong enough to recognize such and bow to them in thanks. Just compare any of these conflicts, these wars, with the spirit of the country in 1945, early in the time of that Greatest Generation. It's hard for most of us to remember 1945, some of you were quite young, like me, others perhaps not yet even born. But we have all learned about those legends. What have these past fifty years been like? I suggest or contend a gradual decline in our "Greatness" and a decay in our pride in ourselves. Replaced with "exceptionalism"?

Legends, stories, rhymes, or poems abound throughout history. They are often powerful in meaning but obscure enough to be children's tales. For example, "Humpty Dumpty Sat on the Wall;" we all know this short verse and it may have been the first nursery rhyme I ever learned. But what does it mean? Silly, an egg on the castle wall! Many believe, however, that Humpty was indeed

Richard the Third, the last of the Plantagenets, defeated at Bosworth Field, made famous by William Shakespeare. The dastardly Richard, a murderer, as a children's rhyme?!? The English monarchy survived Richard as has its structure of inherited privilege and global importance.

Perhaps the most well known folk hero from our English heritage is Robin Hood. He was my favorite when I was around eight years of age. This legend had everything! A band of brothers in Sherwood Forest; a bad king suppressing the people; a good king off on a crusade in the Middle East, captured and imprisoned; stealing from the rich and giving to the poor; an oppressive sheriff; and a beautiful girl. Of course, all ended well for Robin and the good king, so what's not to like! Robin was anointed or given a noble title and the Merry Men were allowed to hunt in the forest, but for just a while I fear.

We also must remember A Thousand and One Nights, perhaps our first encounter with Middle Eastern or Muslim culture. Islam, Christianity, and Judaism all are religions today as they were yesterday. But Democracy is nowhere near as old as any of these religions. I guess that's Interesting!

We Americans have had lots of legends and heroes over the past two hundred years, but none have so broadly captured the imagination as the Wild West, the cowboys and indians. Manifest Destiny writ large. We believe that the United States espouses Freedom, Opportunity, and Equality for All. But does the Wild West exemplify these values. Some say “yes”, others “no”.

Part of these legends and shared feelings are another two words, just mentioned, “Manifest Destiny.” Also pretty easy to understand, but today broadly applied to many things thought by some to be exclusively American; things like: coast to coast, “From sea to shining sea,” God fearing, even God given, hard working, virtuous, and most of all, A Special Mission.

To be sure, the United States is not alone today or throughout history in these feelings of Destiny or Exceptionalism. Think for another moment, back to World War II once again, both Germany and Japan felt themselves to be exceptional, superior, and entitled. Sonderweg was the German word. And we, in America, produced boys who trained hard and fought well, our Greatest Generation. We all know this, but this is us. NOW, we are not writing about tomorrow. We are living it!

One could carry on for many pages or volumes with legends, heroes, and myths almost all of which have some measure of either truth and/or hope for all to ponder and enjoy. Happy endings, awards of nobility or position, peace and prosperity for all. Our Destiny to discover!

If we step away from legend and come back to reality, just what is our country, our government, our nation. That question I asked at the beginning of this treatise, “Who are we Americans as a Nation?” We all know American history, in fact many of you are Scholars of History and educators. I am a layman and probably an “outlier.” But hopefully, as Rousseau said, and he was actually quoting Horace, “I’m capable of pondering my own ignorance.” I suggest to you, none the less, some practical insight into the evolution of our nation which just might not coincide with contemporary thought.

The nature or structure of the United States, those original thirteen colonies, emanates from the social and political philosophies of Europe in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. There is a pretty clear line between John Locke, Jean Jacques Rousseau, and Thomas Jefferson. Let’s just look at their

writings: “Two Treatises on Government”, “The Social Contract”, and the “Declaration of Independence”.

Out of these came the United States Constitution, the Bill of Rights, and seventeen amendments between 1794 and 1992. On its surface, and as interpreted by the Supreme Court, these appear to embody those principals of the Founding Fathers only updated by the progress of time. Oh how I would like to believe such! Freedom, Opportunity, and Equality

We Americans put the concept of "democracy" in a revered, almost sacred, position in our political creed. But how many definitions of democracy are there, how many interpretations and iterations there have been over centuries. A very simple definition from the contemporary and all-knowing source, Wikipedia, goes like this: "Democracy is a form of government where citizens choose and replace the government through free and fair elections." This Wikipedia definition may meet the criteria of “being short,” but it is damned silly! As we all know so well, democracy is a form or philosophy of government which has been long discussed and debated, from the ancients, Plato and Aristotle, into the Middle

Ages with Aquinas or Moore, and into the Moderns like Locke, Voltaire, Rousseau, Hobbes, Marx, and numerous others.

I opine that we in America in the early twenty-first century have converted the philosophy or concept of modern democracy into yet another form of aristocracy, class distinction, plutocracy, oligarchy, or control of the many by the few. Whether we call it an oligarchy or Congress, what we have actually created is either benevolent or suppressive, depending upon your income or station in life. We have "bread and circuses" and illusions of those founding values, but the great drive of consumer products for all has replaced "equality", student debt has replaced "opportunity", and law upon law to safeguard against every conceivable problem or potential problem has replaced "freedom." In deference to all of you, my dear friends, I ask how can we justify exporting this democracy by just saying "one man one vote"? It doesn't work that way! Born free, so put yourselves in chains. Our concept or product is injurious and debilitating to the countries and cultures to whom we zealously export our brand of democracy.

So just how did we get here from the struggle begun in 1776? A single quote from *The Social Contract* says it all: “Nothing is more dangerous than the influence of private interests in public affairs, and the abuse of the laws by the government is less evil than the corruption of the legislator, which is the inevitable sequel to private points of view.” (3). I contend that “*Citizens United versus the Federal Election Committee*”, says it all on the other side, that is the demise of democracy or anything resembling a “social contract” in the United States of America. Today the contract is between the campaign donor, the lobbyist, or the Super PAC and the candidate or legislator, not between the people and their representative. To deny that this single episode, this very recent decision by the well respected and admired Supreme Court, does anything other than confirm the ability of the rich and privileged to buy the government.

As to our democracy, I am not so sure that the image Jefferson had in mind is anything like that which has evolved over the past 200 years.

“Remember,” John Adams said, “democracy never lasts long. There was never a democracy yet that did not commit suicide.” But perhaps Ben Franklin

put it best upon exiting the Constitutional Convention Hall, “You’ve got your republic now, see if you can keep it.” Ben feared democracy.

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- (1) The Social Contract, Rousseau
- (2) Horace, forward of The Social Contract by Rousseau
- (3) The Social Contract
- (4) The Washington Post, Sept. 12 2013