

But It Rhymes

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The major events of the 20th Century have shaped and informed me and, I expect many of you as well. The end of WWI, the centenary of which passed almost unnoticed in the U.S., marked the beginning of my father's life. Grandpa had received his draft notice and was due to report in December of 1918. Grandma was 8 months pregnant, worried to distraction about how she would maintain the modest farm in Indiana with three children under 5 and one on the way. News of the armistice travelled slowly to the Loblolly Swamp country and so it was likely November 12th or 13th before she heard of it and when she did, she went into premature labor and produced my father on the 16th. Following that dramatic beginning he was a youth in the Depression, served in WWII and Korea, settled in Dayton and made the best sense he could of post-WW II America. Whatever the indifference of my countrymen, WWI marked the beginning of my father's life and has framed my sense of history.

The Great War saw millions die, marked the end of the era of royalty, redrew the map of Europe, witnessed the triumph of Bolshevik Communism, and set the stage for WW II. The previous century had been largely peaceful in Europe except for the wars of German unification. Come back with me to that other exception to European tranquility, the clamorous and short-lived revolutions of 1848. Most view them as failed attempts at reordering society, and yet the ideas and impulses let loose then came to violent and destructive fruition 64 years later.

My story's leading man is the Iron Chancellor, *der Eisenkanzler*, Otto von Bismarck. His accomplishments were colossal; his character deformed by its source in even-then outdated Prussian-Junker feudalism; he bestrode the European stage as the genius of his age - evil genius if one was French or Austrian, pater patriae, or

Vater des Vaterlandes if German. He unified Germany by ruthless deceit, for which his countrymen would pay dearly in the first half of the next century. But even with all that, aside from historical interest, why learn what he did and how and why he did it? This paper will attempt to answer these and a few other questions.

In 1860 in the *Times of London* ran an opinion piece which included the following: Prussia “has a large army, but notoriously one in no condition for fighting...no one counts on her as a friend; no one dreads her as an enemy. How she became a great power, history tells us; why she remains so, nobody can tell.”

In his diary Disraeli records that in June of 1862 at a reception at the London residence of the Russian ambassador, Bismarck who was then Prussian ambassador to the Russian court, said to Disraeli and other dignitaries, including the Austrian ambassador, the following:

“I shall soon be compelled to undertake the conduct of the Prussian government. My first care will be to reorganize the army with or without the help of the Landtag (legislature). As soon as the army shall have been brought into such a condition as to inspire respect, I shall seize the first, best pretext to declare war against Austria, dissolve the German Diet, subdue the minor states, and give national unity to Germany under Prussian leadership. I have come here to say this to the Queen’s ministers.”

Walking home afterward with the Austrian ambassador, Disraeli records himself as saying, “Take care of that man. He means what he says.” History was to prove Disraeli correct in this judgment.

Later that year King William appointed him Minister President and foreign secretary over the objections of the queen and crown prince and most of the rest of the government. Bismarck was by some accounts the most disliked man in Prussia. His reputation for expressing eccentric and outrageous sentiments was enabled by the

profound contradictions in his character. He was by turns capable of disarming honesty and the wild deceits of the confidence man. He carried himself with perfect self-confidence yet was prey to rage, anxiety, illness, hypochondria, and irrationality. His successes came from his gargantuan personality, his commanding intellect and the force of his language, both spoken and written, which brilliance and precision won over friends and softened foes. Within nine years of his audacious statement at the Russian ambassador's, he had accomplished all he said in pretty much the manner he predicted. He did all this without commanding the military, persuading the masses, or benefitting from strong parliamentary majorities, and in the face of stubborn reluctance from the Prussian king.

Whoever said, "History doesn't repeat itself but at times it rhymes," hints at where this exercise in mining the past for insights is headed. Consider; Bismarck emerged from youthful obscurity at a time of unrest and insurrection, when the old ways seemed impotent and the new fiercely resisted by the aristocratic relics of 18th century social norms. These times sent nearly a million Germans to the United States between 1848 and 1861. Some of you may be, like I am, descended from German '48ers. A quick look at the 1848 uprisings should prove helpful.

After Waterloo, in 1815, the peace was founded on the understanding that the status quo ante would be, as far as possible, the basis for the European future. This meant, among other things, the reaffirmation of monarchy and its decayed feudal trappings as the norm in governance and social status. Metternich of Austria, chief architect of the peace, had suppressed nationalist risings in the swollen, polyglot amalgamation of central Europeans known as the Austro-Hungarian Empire, led by the Habsburg dynasty, perhaps the only royal tribe to rival Victoria and her offspring in mediocracy. So here is the first element of civilian insurrection – suppressed nationalism governed by men of modest intelligence whose chief interest seemed to be the glorification of status derived from forms of

social organization which had been made outdated by the American and French revolutions. These enlightenment ideas fomented clashes between those who wished progress and those who wished preservation of past values and privileges.

Add to this the disturbances of the industrial revolution which made the aristocratic order seem obsolescent; social prestige and political power were for sale to the wealthiest capitalist. Without delving into the effects of Watt's improvement of steam power or the disruptions to village life implied by the adoption of factory-based production, what had seemed settled for many generations was called to question. Village life among kith and kin became urban squalor among other wage slaves. How the populace was to sustain itself became less a matter of community and tradition and more a matter of chance. When harvests were scanty or the stock market turned, the newly urbanized peasants reached for explanations of and relief from their miseries. Markets were down, food was scarce, and Marx produced the "Communist Manifesto" in 1848.

In 1848 violent disturbances erupted across much of Europe; among other cities, Paris, Milan, Venice, Vienna and Berlin suffered violent upheavals. The urban proletariat, enduring food shortages and layoffs, took to the squares and plazas to demand changes in the management of things. The quip in Berlin went *Presse Freiheit oder Essen Freiheit*, freedom of the press or freedom to eat. The revolutionists wanted both. Bismarck had a large say in what they ultimately got. Bad harvests, horrific conditions in factories and workshops, and the harkening to the great revolutions of the 18th century brought the workers, the students, and the progressive intellectuals into the plazas to tear up the cobbles and fight the armies at the barricades. The Prussian monarchy seemed knocked off its feet. The old king agreed to all the progressive demands of the insurrection. Free speech, free press, a constitution with a bill of rights, and an assembly with the power of the purse were all promised as the king, Frederick William IV, withdrew his interest and

let others manage the kingdom. As you are aware the revolution was short-lived

The Prussian uprising in 1848 had two effects on German politics. First it produced a period, alas brief, when it was possible to imagine Prussia and all of Germany turning toward liberal democracy and away from absolutism. Many talented, intelligent men strove passionately for this end and, but for Bismarck, might have succeeded. All this liberalism evoked a fierce resistance among conservatives. First among these for the rest of the 19th century was Bismarck.

Second, and more positively, it led to the unification of Germany. I don't say reunification because whatever construction you place on the Holy Roman Empire, beyond the oft-quoted joke, it is impossible to think of "Germany" as ever having been unified. It may have had a single emperor, but the member states maintained their own governments, customs systems, and local traditions. By the end of the Franco-Prussian War in January 1871, all 4 kingdoms and 32 duchies, baronies, free cities and whatever else there was had been subsumed, under Prussia, in the second Reich with the Prussian king, now the German Kaiser, reigning with few limitations. All of this had been shepherded into being by Bismarck. These two developments, the frustration of liberal democracy and the glorification of the monarch, describe the aims and eventual successes of Otto von Bismarck. Much of the rest that he did can be attributed to political maneuvering to hold power so as to exalt the monarchy and discredit liberal democracy.

Bismarck was a Junker, a term conveying minor aristocracy, derived from Middle German *Juncherre*, or sort of junior lord, understood to be the squirearchy of Pomerania, East Brandenburg, East and West Prussia, and Posen, areas now largely in northern Poland and the Baltic states.

The poorer Junkers sought careers in the civil administrations of the various territorial princes or, most commonly, in the Prussian

army, or as mercenaries. Even one who knows little of German social history can perhaps recognize the names von Moltke, von Blucher, von Richthofen, von Schlieffen, von Clausewitz, von Tirpitz, von Hindenburg, or even von Braun. The common element, von, was the marker that set these men apart from other Germans and gave this class its cohesion. They were professional soldiers, bureaucrats, and owners/managers of vast estates with authority of life and death over their peasants. Their way of life required them to support absolute monarchy and provide financial support for the army. The king (or Kaiser) must rule the nation with the same unfettered authority that they exercised over their peasants. While this over-simplified explanation of the Junker class has some holes, it will shed some light on their behavior in the years between 1848 and 1914.

As a sidebar, when the Russians came through the Eastern Prussian provinces in 1944-45, and in the political rearrangements for the new East Germany, it was the Junkers who were singled out for particular punishment. Their misery may in some ways soften our feelings of resentment for their arrogance and subservience to such as Hitler and be seen on some level as just deserts. Sidebar two, the details of legislative and diplomatic maneuvers are extensive and dense enough to take up a paper of their own, but they are not my subject and so will not get much exploration here.

It's 1848. The Prussian king has panicked and fled Berlin. In order to calm things, he has promised reforms including an elected assembly, freedoms of expression, and various governmental reforms. The liberals rejoice while the royalists, especially the Junker class, grind their teeth and plot resistance. Among these latter is a young man of previously unimpressive accomplishments who is suddenly inspired to restore royal power and thwart liberal ambitions. By a combination of marriage and other social associations, Bismarck comes to the attention of influential military and bureaucratic figures and finds his way, first to the Landtag and then to the diplomatic service, where he succeeds in supporting the

new king, Wilhelm I, and confounding Prussia's foreign competitors for pre-eminence in the world of pan-German politics. (William or Wilhelm are used interchangeably)

Germans were divided, north to south -Lutherans to Catholics, West to East – Prussians to Austrians, large to small – Austria and Prussia to thirty-odd sovereignties. There existed then a yearning to identify and show pride in all things German, and there was much to be proud of. The 19th century can reasonably be called the German century. In music, philosophy, metallurgy, chemistry, education, public health, Germany was pre-eminent. This pride connected to a desire to unite politically, to show the world what a united Germany could do.

But the road to a united Germany had many obstacles. Chief among these was the question of Austria. Those who favored Germany without Austria were *Kleindeutsch*, Small Germany, while those who felt Austria, had to be included were called the *Grossdeutsch*, Great Germany party. The first dominated by Protestant Prussia, the second by Catholic Austria, including her majority of non-Germans. And it was the non-German population of the Austro-Hungarian Empire that clashed with the culture-wide pan-German impulse for unity. Over the centuries the Habsburgs had collected, by conquest and dynastic marriage, an array of nations – Slovaks, Slovenes, Czechs, Serbs, Croatians, Bosnians, Italians, and most importantly Hungarians -- all of whom were awakening to their own nationalistic desires for independence and self-determination. To achieve a German nation-state with Austria would require denying the same impulse in the nations of her restive empire. How to include Austria and exclude the non-Germans was the rock on which the *Grossdeutsch* party foundered. This foundering was aided, even directed by Chancellor Bismarck.

The sobriquet Iron Chancellor came to mean the implacable will with which he pursued his objectives. However, it derived from a speech he made during the tumultuous 1860s in which he remarked,

having heard endless debates without result during the *Grossdeutsch* / *Kleindeutsch* debates, that Prussia's destiny would be determined, "Not through speeches and majority decisions... – that was the great mistake of 1848 and 1849 – but by iron and blood."

He was as good as his word. In 15 months Prussia was at war with Denmark over the succession in Schleswig-Holstein. Here he had Austria's assistance. I will spare you any attempt on my part to make clear what was going on and offer instead Lord Palmerston's quip about the Danish war, "Only three people ever understood it. The king, who is now dead, a professor who was driven mad and I, who have forgotten all about it."

Two years later was Austria's turn. In violation of a treaty, Bismarck maneuvered the Austrians into declaring war and showed them (and the world at large) the power of the modernized Prussian Army by delivering a crushing defeat to Franz-Joseph's troops at the battle of Koniggratz. Six weeks from war declaration to Austria's surrender put an end to the *Grossdeutsch* proposals. Oddly, Bismarck took no territory from the Austrians; he was satisfied with this demonstration of *macht politik*, diplomacy by force.

He had worked his way up from a lowly legislator to Minister President of Prussia and finally Reichskanzler, serving as a diplomat and learning how to use and flout the diplomatic conventions of the day to achieve his goals. With Denmark and Austria effectively neutralized, he turned his attention to France. It could reasonably be said of the diplomatic intrigues leading up to the Franco-Prussian War of 1870 that he played Napoleon III like a violin. Let me illustrate.

As soon as the dust settled from the Austrian war, King William, Moltke, and Bismarck vacationed in and around Paris. Bismarck charmed the Parisians and met with Napoleon several times, taking his measure. Meanwhile Moltke enjoyed hiking in the countryside nearby making notes on a map identifying the best locations for artillery and gathering other information which was to prove useful

three years later. Apparently, Bismarck and the Prussian general staff had concluded the next war would be with France.

Louis Napoleon needed a victory to ease his domestic political difficulties. Prussia's defeat of Austria was said to have reordered the European balances of power in ways that left Napoleon looking impotent and France diminished. He had squandered a good deal of political currency with the disastrous foray into Mexico (remember Maximilian?) and sought to recover his reputation and sense of potency by seeking to incorporate Belgium and Luxembourg into the French empire. The cry was to recover the provinces lost after Waterloo, and so Belgium and Luxembourg. He expressed the opinion that Prussia should reward him for remaining neutral during the Austro-Prussian War, even though the state of France's army and economy precluded his taking any active part. Bismarck didn't refuse. He knew Britain would never surrender Belgium, nor Prussia Luxembourg. And though nothing came of Napoleon's efforts, the news was leaked (almost certainly by Bismarck) to Napoleon's great embarrassment. Still, Bismarck kept him dangling for quite some time. Then came the *casus belli* from an unexpected direction.

Spain needed a monarch. The last Spanish Bourbon had been deposed in 1868 and the junta reached out to a reasonably Catholic and reasonably noble, cousin of King William, the acceptable and otherwise unremarkable, Prince Anton Hohenzollern-Sigmaringen. As a proper German dynast, he needed the head of the family, King William, to grant permission. After much dithering permission was given (with some assistance from Bismarck), and then the French found out. What followed was much huffing and puffing and sabre rattling from the French about having Hohenzollerns on two flanks of the French nation. William withdrew permission, and then the fateful blunder.

Bismarck needed a defensive war to achieve his over-riding ambition – the unification of Germany under the aegis of the Prussian royal house. By 1869 Prussia had incorporated Lutheran Germany

into the North German Federation, but southern, Catholic, Germany seemed uninclined to join any federation led by Prussia. The intense patriotic feeling after the war with Austria had faded, and luring France to declare war would activate mutual defense treaties with the southerners and raise patriotism to the needed pitch. It looked, however, as if the Spanish succession would not do the trick when the French sent their ambassador to persuade King William to withdraw his permission; permission was withdrawn. All was well; there would be no German king on two of France's borders and no war. Unable to leave well-enough alone, the French made demands. The French foreign minister, a bellicose, excitable man, certainly an odd personality for a diplomat, the Duc de Gramont, instructed his ambassador to press King William to declare to the world that Prussia would never again allow such a circumstance to occur. This was a step too far. Insulted, William coldly refused to meet again with the ambassador.

William telegraphed his version of events to Bismarck with permission to publish. Bismarck edited the telegram to make it more insulting to French honor and sent it to the papers. War was declared and preparations began at once; France proceeded with confusion, corruption, and delay, Prussia with clockwork precision. Bismarck knew that Napoleon didn't want war but could not withstand the pressure from his militarists. Napoleon said to the nation, "Where we go beyond our borders we will walk in the footsteps of our forefathers, and we shall make them proud." It didn't work out that way as you almost certainly know. Napoleon was captured and his armies driven from the field and besieged at Sedan. The French refused to surrender, and the war took on a guerilla aspect.

Fighting died down, Paris was occupied, and Bismarck hard at work negotiating with Wurttemberg, Bavaria, Baden and Saxony over terms of union with Prussia in what became the Second Reich, the German Empire. This was ticklish business. Bismarck aimed for a united Germany under Prussian control, which meant for him that

the rest of Germany, especially the southern states, would become more like Prussia.

The southern states, especially Bavaria, had their own ideas about whose culture should predominate. King Ludwig claimed quite correctly that the Wittelsbachs had been on their throne far longer than the comparatively upstart Hohenzollerns. But the Hohenzollerns had the Prussian army and Ludwig had squandered all he had building Wagnerian confections such as Neuschwanstein in the Bavarian alps. A few reminders about power disparities along with the secret distribution of monies to the Bavarian treasury quieted resistance from that quarter, and so after one-on-one negotiations with the other southerners, Bismarck had his objective. Describing German unification in his diary, Disraeli observed, "There is not a single diplomatic tradition that has not been swept away."

How did the Americans create a federal union some 82 years earlier? With a committee. It may be that the only lasting good to ever come out of committees are the King James Bible and the U.S. Constitution. Bismarck must have shared this opinion of committees because he did everything himself. He simply updated the constitution of the North German Federation, a constitution he had dictated in an afternoon after the Austrian war. By threats and enticements he overcame resistance. In early 1871 at Versailles in the Hall of Mirrors, Bismarck saw William Hohenzollern, the Prussian King, crowned Emperor Wilhelm First of the German Reich under a constitution written by Bismarck alone.

His life's ambition fulfilled he served another 18 years as Chancellor, seeing the passing of Wilhelm I, the three-month reign of the liberal Frederick William, and the accession of Wilhelm II. Bismarck's creation, a Prussified Germany, proved more a curse than a blessing to two generations of Europeans in the next century. Because he had created a Germany which gave its monarch the central place and restrained his powers with the lightest of reins, Prussian standards and norms were inculcated throughout the

Reich. The hard military edge imposed on the whole country made it easy to forget that before 1871 Germany meant a jovial, red-cheeked toy maker with stein and sausage.

Those post-unification years were marked by some oddly familiar stories, such as the culture wars he picked with the Catholic church and the introduction of a system of social security protections, neither of which seems likely for such an arch conservative. But Bismarck was always willing to abandon every principle for the sake of getting and using power, every principle except the strengthening of king or Kaiser and the unification of Germany under Prussian control. His and Germany's, and eventually Europe's dilemma sprang from exalting an office which was occupied by men of limited intelligence and abilities.

How does one manage an absolute monarch who only has to answer to God? In order to get his way, Bismarck made himself indispensable and then pouted and threatened to resign if the monarch refused to do what the chancellor wanted. Like all gamblers bluffing with a weak hand, the toll on his nerves and disposition was enormous, so much so that he frequently retreated to his estates in the east to recuperate and plan how to get either of the Wilhelms to do his bidding.

With the younger Wilhelm his string finally ran out. The Kaiser's inner circle felt the importance of competing with Britain, France, and the other colonial powers for the last uncolonized chunks of Africa and the Pacific outweighed the risk of armed conflict with Britain, or as events would prove, armed conflict with the rest of the world. Whether or not Bismarck foresaw such an event, he argued forcefully for a more cautious approach than that favored by Wilhelm and his crew of yes-men who eventually persuaded the Kaiser to send him packing. In 1890, Bismarck's retreat to his Pomeranian forest was allowed to stand. He had managed Wilhelm I by making himself indispensable. Wilhelm II believed he could do very well without the

old chancellor. Though he lived for another eight years, for the Kaiser he no longer mattered.

One eerily current factoid fell out of my reading for this paper. Wilhelm II took such great offense to news he did not like that his staff prepared for him his own version of the *Allgemeine Zeitung* which was printed in-house adorned with a gold-lettered masthead and with all the unpleasant bits excised. It seems reasonable to suppose that his ability to make sound decisions was compromised by his willful ignorance, and that he would have sympathized with those who deny unflattering facts as “fake news”.

I don't intend to labor through the years between Bismarck's dismissal and the start of WWI, except to make this point: Germany united, his great creation, required a man of political genius to manage its internal contradictions. He bequeathed to his successors a prosperous nation with a dominant military, and thanks to his diplomatic skills, a respected force in international affairs. All of this fell into the hands of a monarch whose abilities were mediocre at best. It is difficult to imagine Bismarck offering Austria the “blank check” of 1914, or of keeping his word in the event that the Habsburgs tried to cash it. Bismarck's iron and blood were wielded against neighboring powers whom he knew to be weak and vulnerable. Denmark, then Austria, and finally France were slapped down when it suited Bismarck to do so. Even though Austria and France were deemed great powers, he knew from intelligence reports and his own assessment of their leadership that they were vulnerable and so he provoked them to give him what he wanted – short successful wars which spurred German patriotism and led to unification.

This is vulnerable to the criticism that because we know the outcome, of course it had to end this way. Bismarck was not only a political master but also prudent in his use of the military tools he had at his disposal. Except for Austria, his big gambles were pretty sure shots. Austria was lured by his duplicities to divide its army and

prepare to fight in Italy as well as defend against Prussia. Breech-loaded rifles and artillery forged of *Kruppstahl* gave the edge to Prussia. Even with these advantages the Battle of Koniggratz was a near thing. Bismarck, for all his public confidence, was often gripped by the gambler's anxiety, knowing that a small miscalculation could end his entire program. The photographs tell this story. By the end of his service to Kaiser und Vaterland, the lines on his face said much of the personal cost of his triumphs.

There comes a time, I suppose, when the greatest actor has to get off stage. Bismarck was heaped with titles and estates and yet one cannot read of his dismissal by such a second-rate person as Wilhelm as anything less than a sad irony. Wilhelm used the royal prerogative to sideline the very man who had glorified and preserved it. Bismarck's demise could also be seen as just desserts for his bending every scruple to achieve his aim, only to have the product of his labors dismiss and diminish him. It is hard to admire Bismarck the man for all his arrogance and overbearing behavior, and yet it is also hard to imagine anyone else accomplishing what he did for his class, country, and king. That he used unscrupulous means makes him smaller but not his great achievement.

On the occasion of his death in early 2021, NPR reran G. Gordon Liddy's interview on Fresh Air. In responses to some direct questions about his behavior and the law, Liddy was very clear that he had no doubt what he had done was lawful because he did it in support of Nixon, asserting essentially that whatever served the interests of the President became licit, the ends justifying the means. One can imagine Bismarck nodding in understanding, if not accepting the parallel between the Prussian king and an American president. Roy Cohn can be added to the list of those who modelled their behavior on Bismarck's, and you can likely recall another from recent American history who was Cohn's pupil. There may be examples of Bismarck's methods benefitting mankind; none come to mind. He was insightful and clever enough to escape the usual

consequences for duplicitous manipulation. He lied, cheated, and bullied to gain power which he used to exalt the Prussian king and create modern Germany. As I indicated earlier, while he escaped the consequences, his countrymen did not.

And yet, and yet. Looked at from a different perspective, we can perhaps allow Bismarck's partial rehabilitation. His methods have been called *Realpolitik*, but they should more accurately be categorized as *Machtpolitik*, the pursuit of power to resolve questions of diplomacy and public policy by force, in the judgment of some historians a very Prussian thing to do. So he pursued and wielded power to create the militaristic Second Reich, which lasted almost half a century and shape-shifted into the Third Reich, which lasted 13 years, 987 fewer than the predictions of its central figures. Both empires were crushed but only after immense destruction and suffering for all Europeans.

That suffering becomes an enormous load for Bismarck's reputation to bear; pause a moment and imagine Europe without two great wars and think of all that was lost. Some of this can be laid to the *Eisenkanzler* and more besides. He not only forged an empire, he also made a nation out of the irreconcilable particularities of 19th century German life and culture. Irreconcilable, that is, to all but Bismarck. Reichs may be crushed but the "German" nation continues, and it is the German nation midwifed by Bismarck. Adenauer, Kohl, Erhard, Schmidt, Merkel, et al, have led the Germany that likely only Bismarck could have created. In *I Claudius* Robert Graves has a Roman general say of the Germans, "They are either at your throat or at your feet." We can hope that future German leaders will continue to seek a middle way.

Perhaps we should wish the same for our own divided Nation. The transition from an industrial to a digital economy has left many Americans adrift in a world they don't fit or understand very well. We live in perilous times, and have endured epochal change, fierce division, executive mediocracy, legislative deadlock, culture wars,

and anxiety at the rise of China. For the past 65 years we have placed more and more emphasis on and devoted more and more resources to a military establishment which seems more and more reluctant to yield to civilian authority and less and less capable of meeting the challenges of the asymmetrical struggles of the last generation. Times like these cry out for strong leadership which some seek, no matter how many of our traditions and liberties such a leader might traduce. We are not Prussia and what happened to Germany doesn't have to be repeated here. And yet, and yet... the similarities between then and now, between them and us, give me pause.

When asked what the Constitutional Convention had accomplished, Franklin answered, "A republic, if you can keep it." So far we seem to have kept it. Another of his maxims brings me to a close. "Those who trade liberty for security deserve neither."