

It is impossible for the man of pious reflection not to perceive in it a finger of that Almighty hand which has been so frequently and signally extended to our relief in the critical stages of the revolution.

--James Madison (Federalist, no. 37.)

Part II

THE AMERICAN MIRACLE

We were in France, visiting with a Frenchman and his wife. Our daughter Signe was translating his urgent request. He had invented a device for underwater travel but had been unable to find anyone interested in marketing his invention. He said, "I know that someone in the United States would be interested in my invention. In America a person has a chance. Here things have become so socialistic that no one cares to invest."

In his voice there was a longing for freedom, despair for the socialistic conditions in France. He expressed his deep adoration for the United States of America. He talked so idealistically that I felt the impulse to tell him that the United States has its share of problems, too. As I began he stopped me. "I don't want to hear it." His countenance fell, and looking to the floor he continued, "I don't want to hear about it. I've got to have something to believe in. I believe in America. It's my last hope. I have to believe it even if it's no longer true."

A year later we were in Thailand. My son Adam was conversing with a waiter--a young man about twenty-five years old. He said he worked fourteen hours a day and earned approximately ninety-six dollars a month.

After expressing the hopelessness of the situation, he added, "I would give anything to be able to go to America--even for a year. If I could live in America I could learn English and get a better job when I

returned to Thailand. Here there is no chance for advancement. In America, there's hope."

An acquaintance was in the city of Beijing during the student demonstration for democracy in June 1989. He observed the military, as they crept in to discourage the demonstration; he watched as a young man held back an entire entourage of tanks with a reprimand. Then something happened. Evidently the word was given to stop the demonstrations, at any cost. He watched, as the tanks charged through the crowds of people, like a tractor through a field of wheat. In the aftermath, the streets were littered with crushed bodies, carts, and bicycles. Then the shooting began. To avoid the random shooting through his upper hotel window, he remained flat on the floor. Finally, after several days, he slipped out of the hotel and began walking toward the airport. People ran up to him over and over and asked, "Are you a journalist?" Without waiting for an answer, they continued, "Tell the people what really happened. Tell the people the truth."

With tears of emotion in his eyes he said, "I cannot tell you how relieved I was to get on the plane for the United States. We take our freedoms for granted, but it'll be a long time before I do. To have the right to disagree with the government--to have the right to walk down a street without being watched; oh, we are such a blessed nation!"

Just recently, I became acquainted with a Japanese woman who lived through the nuclear bombing nightmare of World War II. She recalls, "It seemed like the end of the world. Everywhere you looked the city was flattened. There were no buildings standing. There was no food, no water."

"My father, a newspaper editor, tried to tell the truth about what was happening; but then they came and destroyed his business. There was nothing left."

"At first I hated the Americans, but when I went to college, I discovered the truth. I knew then that I could no longer live in a country that had betrayed me; I determined that one day I would move to the United States of America. I left at the age of twenty-six.

Now I travel a lot--just to remind myself that I live in a great country. I know that most Americans don't feel like I do; they take their freedoms for granted, but I am grateful to be an American. There is no place in the world like America."

The United States still stands brightly as a beacon to the world. In some countries the people sacrifice their lives to get out--with the United States, they sacrifice to get in. The USA is a symbol of freedom, faith, hope, opportunity, and advancement. America is great because it has a government of law--not of man--it is a government that derives its "just powers from the consent of the governed." America is great because it leaves local affairs in the hands of local governments. America is great because it has a Bill of Rights that insures freedom of conscience, of worship, of the press, of speech, of privacy, and of assembly. America is great because it has the right to own property without molestation. America is great because under our form of government, we as a people have progressed quicker and further than any other people in the world. Truly, the American experiment has been the most wondrous success story in history. Nations throughout the world have patterned their constitutions after the United States.

A Glorious Adventure

The American miracle began as a prayer in the hearts of seekers for truth and freedom. Columbus came to America because he believed he was led by divine inspiration. Pilgrims wrestled with the cruel elements of the land and sea because they would rather die than be shackled by religious persecution and intolerance. It began with a deep resolve--to have liberty or death!

It is difficult, if not impossible, to comprehend the ugliness of religious persecution. My eyes were opened--in a small town in Belgium. My husband and I toured a deserted old castle--an awesome, black encrusted edifice built around the year twelve hundred. As we walked from one musty, foul-smelling room to another, I sensed a heavy spirit of doom. In the depths of the dungeon, I realized why. The room was full of crude displays of torture devices. The pictures on the walls portrayed the story. Edicts, that committed one's soul to the current religion, were to be signed by all--men and women who refused were tortured. Some had their eyes burnt out; others their extremities chopped off; still others had boiling hot lead forced down their throats.

Thus the right of conscience was stripped by force; only those willing to sacrifice life and limb would be able to stand up to their convictions.

In September 1620, the Mayflower was chartered by a small band of Pilgrims (about one hundred). In November, they dropped anchor in the Cap Cod Bay, a cold and barren coast. They remained aboard the ship for over a month in fear, until the captain was ready to throw them overboard. In December they ventured forth to land on Plymouth Rock. They named their colony after their homeland--New England. Within that first winter most of them died from harsh elements and starvation.

Yet, despite the extreme difficulties they faced in colonization, they eventually prospered. They knew the price that had to be paid, and they paid it with industry, determination, perseverance and a commitment to God. (It is interesting that only twenty-three years after the landing, the population of New England was twenty-four thousand.)

The colonists were left to rule themselves--except for the appointment of a governor who represented the interests of England. The Americans saw themselves as loyal subjects to the Mother Country; they were proud of their heritage.

For generations they were overlooked by England. The child grew fat, proud and high on liberty. (It was not easy to exercise effective control from across the sea.) They enjoyed the almost free rein of an independent nation, as well as the protection from outside molestation that Mother England provided. It was all too wonderful. Then, within a short span of ten to twelve years, a series of events took place that would change the lives of the colonists forever.

England, suffering from financial exhaustion, turned to her child for help. In the beginning the colonists readily agreed to assist. It was said that they were so yielding that they were "led by a thread."

However, Mother England became insatiable in her greed, imposing tax after tax until the colonists cried, "No taxation without representation!" It was unfair to be taxed, the colonists believed, when they had no voice in the decision-making.

Soon a bitterness and resentment set in; the colonists vowed they would not use any article manufactured in England, or engage in any transaction that would be profitable for England.

The Stamp Act (1765) was the final straw. It required a government stamp on all official documents. The people, now obsessed with the idea of independence, refused; "No, we've had enough. We won't do it."

England, powerless to enforce the law, had to repeal it; but within a short time imposed "a long train of abuses and usurpations leading to absolute despotism." A deep resolve began to rise--Patrick Henry spoke for thousands when he declared, "Give me liberty or give me death!"

On July 4, 1776, representatives of the thirteen colonies attached their signatures to the birthplace of a new nation. It was called "The Declaration of Independence." It proclaimed the proper role of government, the "unalienable" rights of man, spelled out in detail the unforgivable crimes of England and declared formal independence. This independence was not to be won lightly; a great sacrifice had to be paid.

The War with England lasted eight long, weary years. The British were well clothed; the Americans were in rags--often trudging through the snow with no shoes. The British had weapons and equipment; the Americans confiscated most of theirs from the British. The British, well-trained professional soldiers, outnumbered the Americans, who were a mere band of unorganized farmers, sailors, merchants, mechanics, and "roustabouts." The British were well supported, while the Americans were discouraged with the constant struggle to obtain reinforcements and provisions. Often fellow Americans chose to sell to the British because it was more profitable.

One historian writes, "Soldiers at Valley Forge went hungry because nearby farmers preferred to sell to the British in Philadelphia for hard cash. . . . Soldiers went half-naked because merchants in Boston would not move government clothing off their shelves at anything less than profits ranging from 1,000 to 1,800 percent. Everywhere in America there was a spirit of profiteering and a habit of graft that made Washington grind his teeth in helpless fury" (Leckie, *The Wars of America*, pp. 180-181).

One soldier, during the winter at Valley Forge wrote, “Poor food--hard lodging--Cold Weather--fatigue--Nasty Cloths--nasty Cookery--Vomit half my time--Smoak’d out of my senses--the Devil’s in it--I can’t endure it--Why are we sent here to starve and freeze?”

The national government was weak under the Articles of Confederation; it had no powers of enforcement. All Congress could do was politely ask the States for help, but usually they wouldn’t, couldn’t, or just didn’t. This left Washington trying to fight a war without the muscle power to gather strength--men, equipment, weapons, food, and money.

It was truly a miracle that the Americans won; however, they faced equally tragic crises eleven years later. In the stinging aftermath of suffering through an offensive and oppressive government, they opted for hardly any at all. They had exchanged tyranny for anarchy. In time it became evident that their beloved country was dying. The helpless, newly born nation was surrounded by nations ready to pounce upon it. The British forces waited to the north, expecting the clumsy and rebellious colonies to fall apart, while the Spanish, to the south, joined ranks with the Indians and began raiding the American settlements. Some American politicians even conspired to help these nations in the confiscation of American soil! In addition to these problems, there arose a spirit of sectionalism that divided the states, a rash of assaults against authority, and skyrocketing inflation.

Of this bleak period in American history, Washington wrote, “The fabric which took nine years at the expense of much blood and treasure to rear, now totters to the foundation, and without support must soon fall” (*Writings of George Washington*, 1939, 29:68).

Alexander Hamilton added, “We may indeed with propriety be said to have reached almost the last stage of national humiliation. Where is scarcely anything that can wound the pride or degrade the character of an independent nation that we do not experience. . . . We have neither troops, nor treasury, no government” (*Federalist Papers*, No. 15).

Washington realized that there was only one hope: “No day was ever more clouded than the present. . . . We are fast verging to anarchy and confusion. . . . How melancholy is the reflection. . . .

What stronger evidence can be given of the want of energy in our government than these disorders? . . . A liberal and energetic constitution, well guarded and closely watched to prevent encroachments, might restore us.” (Fitzpatrick, *The Writings of George Washington*, 29:51-52.).

Despite the crucial need for an “energetic constitution,” the mere gathering together of the representatives from the States became a monumental task. Alexander Hamilton, representative from New York, succeeded in calling for a constitutional convention, but no other state would come. Awhile later he tried again, but was ignored. When Washington learned that there were plans to set up a monarchy and to crown him King George the First, he shuddered and sent an urgent letter to every state pleading for a convention; still no one listened.

Finally, Washington decided to work from the bottom up. The state of Virginia and Maryland were quarreling over fishing rights. He invited delegates from each state to come to his home, have something to eat on the back porch, and discuss the problem. Under such congenial circumstances, they came to an agreement about fishing rights; in addition, they decided to take the initiative to propose to Congress that all states meet together for a trade conference. The conference met, but while discussing their problems decided that nothing short of a constitutional convention could work out trade and other political issues.

On February 21, 1787, Congress sent out invitations for the convention to be held May 14. Little did Congress suspect that before the convention was concluded, the delegates would have drafted a completely new and unique constitution. It was not easy. Delegates argued their strong opinions throughout the hot, humid summer. At times, compromise seemed impossible. It was during one of these discouraging moments that eighty-one year old Benjamin Franklin made his famous plea for prayer. With extreme weakness in his voice, he said, “. . . Have we now forgotten that powerful Friend? Or do we imagine that we no long need His assistance? I have lived, sir, a long time; and the longer I live the more convincing proofs I see of this truth--that God governs in the affairs of men. And if a sparrow cannot fall to the ground without His notice, is it probable that an

empire can rise without His aid?" (Smyth, *The Writings of Benjamin Franklin*, 9:600-601)

On Monday, September 17, 1787, forty-one of the original fifty-five delegates met in the east room of Independence Hall for the signing of the Constitution of the United States of America. The next battle would be to win ratification of the states, which happened four months later, with the addition of the Bill of Rights.

On April 6, 1789, the Constitution of the United States of America went into operation as the basic law of the land. These two documents, the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution, set forth the American formula for peace and prosperity.

It is vital that we as Americans realize our noble heritage! At the end of the summer-long debates over the formulation of the Constitution, it is said that Benjamin Franklin said through tears, "I have . . . often, in the course of the session, . . . looked at that [sun] behind the president [carving of a sun on the chair] without being able to tell whether it was rising or setting. But now at length I have the happiness to know that it is a rising and not a setting sun" (Max Farrand, ed., *The Records of the Federal Convention of 1787*, 2:648).

The signing of the Constitution was truly the rising of the sun--to enlighten the minds of mankind the world over. It was a new day--a new era in which at last, government would be a tool for the people and by the people. James Madison wrote, "Happily for America, happily we trust for the whole human race, they pursued a new and more noble course."