

POST

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THE DECLINE OF THE INDIVIDUAL



By Vice Admiral H. G. RICKOVER

In recent years a sense of uneasiness has crept upon the American people. We have lost some of our exuberance, some of our faith in ourselves. Many of us are disturbed by the loss of good things we cherish as peculiarly American and by the intrusion of distasteful things we never expected would invade our way of life. These changes have been many and various, but they all have a common root: They stem from factors which have conspired to diminish the freedom and dignity of the individual.

These human values are essential in a democracy; anything that threatens them makes our whole society a little less free, our nation a little less strong. The basic tenet of democracy is respect for the equal moral worth of all human beings and the equal freedom of all men to shape their lives as they see fit, provided only that they harm no one and violate no law. Only the self-determining, independent citizen can make a success of self-government.

Yet these same values can be neither created nor preserved without continuous effort, and that effort must come from the people—or rather from the individual citizen. Self-government will not produce a good society unless enough citizens feel an identification with the fate of the nation. Repeating patriotic clichés is not enough.

Even were it conceivable that we might prefer things to freedom—perhaps self-indulgence or social irresponsibility or political apathy—the peril in which our country finds itself today forbids such folly. In its struggle with Communism, democracy cannot afford to forgo a single one of the advantages inherent in a free society: the mutual trust that flourishes in freedom, the release of human initiative and energy, the pragmatism and tolerance that prevent enslavement to dogmatic ideology—these are what give democracy flexibility and strength.

Our nation was launched with a system of government containing numerous safeguards to protect individual liberties. Careful reading of the Declaration of Independence shows that our society pivots on the free citizen. Observe the order of precedence: *First* there is the statement that all men are born equally endowed with “un-

alienable rights,” and some of these are listed; *then* the Declaration notes that governments “are instituted among men” to “secure” these rights, and *finally* it is stated that government derives its “just powers” from the governed. Clearly the founding fathers wanted to make certain that Americans never would be ruled by anyone who had not received their express mandate.

Over the years, however, and especially since the coming of the industrial and later the scientific revolution, radical changes have occurred in our way of life, some of them inimical to the free individual in whom our society is grounded.

The first major threat to individual freedom lies in the replacement of what sociologists call the Protestant ethic, which prevailed in this country until the turn of the century, by a new so-called Freudian ethic. Put in simple terms, the Protestant and Freudian ethics stand for two opposite concepts of man. The first sees him shaping his own destiny, being governed by standards he sets himself and by his own conscience, therefore responsible for his own acts. It is the spiritual foundation of democracy. The second sees man ruled by unconscious drives and external pressures, hence not really responsible for his acts. His life is shaped not by himself but by his socioeconomic environment; if he becomes a failure or a criminal, not he but society is to blame.

American egalitarianism reinforces this caricature of Freud's concepts. Mediocrity excuses itself as the normal and healthy state of mankind. The uncommon man who excels thus becomes a sort of unnatural freak. Conformity to the environment in which one happens to find oneself becomes the safe and approved aim. That this shrivels individual autonomy is a fact not always immediately perceived.

The process starts with the “progressive” school and the permissive home. Emphasis is placed on self-expression rather than on self-discipline; on group adjustment rather than on development of the individual's innate capacities; on gaining popularity with the “peer” group rather than on becoming an independent, self-determining adult human being. The education-

ists' avowed intent to use the school for leveling out human differences strikes me as an assault on the child's basic humanity. Unlike animals who are equipped only for the one kind of life proper to their species—peer group, if you like!—man is infinitely diverse in talents and interests. The higher the cultural level, the greater this diversity; passive adjustment to a group belongs to a more primitive age of man.

Group conditioning in the school makes itself felt in adult life. Increasingly, Americans seek comfort and security through belonging to a particular segment of society. People huddle together in communities populated exclusively by members of some one segment and pattern their personal behavior on group standards. What is particularly disturbing is the resentment that tends to be generated in these closed groups against anyone who thinks independently and who must therefore at times differ from approved “group thought.”

All new ideas begin in a nonconforming mind that questions some tenet of the “conventional wisdom.” All improvements originate in a critical mind that mistrusts the “image” projected by some powerful organism. The innovator of ideas and the social critic are essential to a free society; they are what make the society free.

In a democracy there is need for “critics by profession”—commentators, columnists, etc., whose “beat” is the whole of the social scene—but there is also need of “lay critics” who look upon discovery and publication of truth as part of their civic responsibility. The critic who makes himself an expert on some particular subject, so that he may offer the people information not otherwise available, ought surely to be able to count the people on his side. But, all too often, habits of conformity and mistrust of iconoclasts lead the public to take a neutral position, as if they were judging a proceeding in a court of law.

It is a sad comment on the decline of individualism in America that the critic has no friend at court. He is tagged “controversial,” the worst that can happen to anyone in a conformist society.

Admiral Rickover • "THE INDIVIDUAL IS IN GREATER NEED THAN

The "controversial" tag makes him by definition a "flawed" personality, not group-adjusted, one-sided, ill-informed, frustrated and motivated by ill will. Epithets may therefore be thrown at him with impunity; he may be misquoted and misrepresented, and what he says may be contemptuously dismissed as requiring no refutation whatever.

A second major threat to individual freedom comes from the impact of technology. The utilization of science for practical purposes has such enormous potential for the good or evil of man and society that our attitude toward it requires careful rethinking. We have here a complex problem that calls for a higher order of intelligence than has so far been applied. Up to now we have left technological matters almost entirely to the management of practical men. I submit, however, that the *practical* approach to a new scientific discovery is *short-range* and *private*; it is concerned with ways to put a discovery to use in the most economical and efficient manner. The *scholarly* approach is *long-range* and *public*; it looks to the effects which the use of a new discovery may have on people in general, on the nation, perhaps on the world, and it considers the future as well as the present.

As an engineer I have a healthy respect for the categorical imperatives of nature, imperatives constantly being disregarded for the sake of short-range benefits. I feel strongly that technology must not be raised to the status of an end in itself, but must always remain a means to an end, the end being the welfare of human beings and of the nation as a whole. In determining whether a given technology conforms to this objective, we need the help of both practical and scholarly experts. But the final decision must rest with the American people.

It disturbs me that we allow ourselves to be pressured by purveyors of technology into permitting so-called technical progress to alter our lives without attempting to control this development—almost as if technology were an irrepressible force of nature to which we must meekly submit. If we but paused to reflect before acting, we should note that much which is hailed as progress contributes little or nothing to human happiness. Everything new is not *eo ipso* good and everything old inferior.

Technology does not automatically render obsolete the principles we found good in the past; they belong to a different order of things. Technology is not concerned with them. Principles have to do with the way we marshal our inner resources, discipline our actions and respond to the promptings of our conscience; with the ordering of our personal lives and of our relations with fellow citizens, both in private and in public life. They apply to human beings.

Technology, on the other hand, deals with material things. Technology can enlarge our powers of mind and body. With it we can improve health, produce material abundance, leisure and comfort, circle the earth with instant communications, etc. But technology does not dictate either the manner in which we put it to use or the specific benefits which we want to derive from using it.

I suggest we reject the notion that man is no longer master of his own and of his society's

destiny. Let us put man back in the center of the stage and do some hard thinking about the kind of life that technology is currently creating for us. Only now, for example, are we beginning to realize that careless use of dangerous pesticides and weed killers may poison soil, vegetation, animals and humans. And it took the tragic case of the European thalidomide babies to dramatize the fatal consequences that may result from the hasty use of inadequately tested drugs.

A third threat to individual freedom has been the tremendous increase in the country's population, with all the attendant changes that this has brought. From 1800 to 1850 our population almost quintupled; from 1850 to 1900 it tripled; from 1900 to 1950 it doubled. Natural increase had as much to do with this growth as immigration. Since World War II the growth rate has accelerated so much that when the time comes to celebrate our bicentenary each citizen will have only about one percent of the voting power which individual Americans had in our first national election. A healthy infant born on that day can expect within his lifetime to see our population soar close to the billion mark—unless, of course, we ponder the consequences to the quality of American life and reverse the trend.

Space of itself bestows freedom and dignity; it gives man elbowroom and a chance to find peace and quiet and privacy. When men are scarce each individual becomes important. Today seven out of 10 Americans live in crowded cities, suburbs, and other urban areas, and the country as a whole is more populous per square mile than was Europe at the time of our revolution. It is hard to find quiet and privacy and a spot of unspoiled nature within reach of home. Man-made ugliness presses on the human spirit, and there is no place for our children to play in safety.

As long as a wilderness had to be subdued there was work in abundance, work of a kind that ordinary men with willing hearts and hands could do, vitally needed work that bestowed dignity on the workman. We were a country of independent farmers, artisans and merchants in those days. Now nine out of ten Americans work for others, many for giant organizations where they have little opportunity to feel individually important. Today, moreover, our society is plagued with endemic unemployment, a condition under which it is difficult to hold fast to a sense of human worth. The loss falls most heavily on those—and, alas, there are all too many—who lack the skill and education for which there is demand in a complex modern society. In the past, America offered unique opportunities for social advancement to average men with average competence; today this is less and less true. America once offered steady employment even to men of below-average ability, but job opportunities for them have contracted drastically. Ours is still a land of opportunity, but increasingly so only for the highly skilled and educated.

With the disappearance of preindustrial, rural America we lost a way of life that was congenial to individual freedom and democracy. Life was simple. Ordinary men could understand the world they lived in; they could manage their affairs without much trouble; they could reach independent decisions on public issues that concerned them as citizens of a democracy. The

individual is diminished when he cannot comprehend the problems besetting his nation. I myself think that if we had a first-rate school system, stressing basic education in the liberal arts, many more Americans than now would understand and express their views on public issues.

Serious as is the loss of these natural advantages, however, it need not be fatal to individual freedom or to preservation of a free society. Many of the most civilized modern European countries never had these advantages, yet they were able to evolve out of feudalism and capitalist monarchy into democratic nations where individual freedom is at least as well protected as here—and in some cases better protected. What we need is a new perspective: a recognition that we must now take positive action to create "artificially" the climate in which the autonomous individual and the free society can prosper.

A fourth major threat to individual freedom is the rise of giant organizations which interpose themselves between the citizen and his government. When the nation was founded we did not even have political parties, and there were only seven commercial corporations in all the colonies. We had no labor unions, no vocational or professional associations, no special-interest groups or huge government bureaucracies. The citizen faced his government directly—whether local, state or Federal. With his fellow citizens he shared control over his government on a basis of complete equality.

Today the citizen's wishes may be thwarted if they conflict with the interests of powerful organizations able to bring their immense resources to bear on government. Many organizations, such as labor unions and even women's clubs, have been successful in preventing governmental action they consider harmful to their interests, or in obtaining special government benefits and privileges not vouchsafed ordinary citizens. When society is dominated by powerful organizations the autonomy of the individual is diminished.

Of course, the right to associate with others for the purpose of engaging in joint enterprises is itself an important part of individual freedom. In a huge, populous, technically advanced country such as ours both private and public organizations are indispensable. Enormous good flows from them. Many organizations, furthermore, are exclusively concerned with serving their members and do not seek to influence anyone; others are small and therefore a threat to no one; not a few are big and powerful but exemplary in behavior and performance. These do not concern us here. What does concern us is the threat to individual freedom posed by huge power complexes which dominate our lives but over which we are not able to exercise control. Among these are both public and private organizations.

Large government bureaucracies are as indispensable to modern society as are large private organizations. Many government tasks have to be entrusted to special agencies set up for this purpose. Yet, although they are a part of government, the citizen's influence on them is not as effective as it is on the elected branches of government; nor are the men who run these bureaucracies as accessible to citizens who have legitimate business with them as are elected government officials.

EVER OF PROTECTION FROM HIS FELLOW CITIZENS."

Many large nongovernmental organizations also tend to misuse their power in relations with the public and the government, as when they seek to hold up necessary legislation favored by the electorate or win special favors as a result of past political support—or through the threat of future retaliation at the polls. In some cases, moreover, these organizations develop an autocratic structure which diminishes the freedom and dignity of employees or members, either by needlessly circumscribing their working—and occasionally even their private—lives, or by failing to be responsive to their best interests. Often those “faults of bigness,” as one might call them, are not essential to the purposes of the organization or even relevant to their specific tasks. Once we recognize what makes large organization a danger to freedom, we can deal with the problem without interfering with their lawful pursuits. In fact, protection of individual freedoms will benefit any honest organization, since it releases private initiative, one of the great powers for good inherent in a free society.

Organizations act through men. In our country they act through a special category of career men, called managers or administrators. The 18th-century French statesman Mirabeau once remarked that “to administer . . . is to rule.” One might expand this to say that administration is a type of authoritarian rule with no constituency and no direct popular mandate. As such it is an anomaly in a democratic society.

In nearly all our large organizations administration stands apart and above production. The men who do the real work of the organization are placed below the administrators who rule them. Administrators may or may not have competence in the organization’s special field of work; often they do. Unhappily they often do not. Take education: Clearly the teachers do all the productive work, but it is not they who manage the vast educational enterprise in this country. Teachers are bossed by administrators who quite frequently have not been trained in teaching but only in management of housekeeping, personnel and public-relations chores.

The larger an organization, the more powerful are the managers or administrators. Their source of power comes from being in charge of housekeeping matters, hence of the purse and so in turn of personnel assignment and promotion. As with all rulers, the larger the realm, the more important and better paid are its administrators. This makes them empire builders. It also accounts for a tendency to authoritarianism. Orders flow downward freely, but suggestions rarely rise upward in the hierarchy. This is probably more true of public than of private organizations.

Nevertheless the individual who must work in a large organization, whether private or public, meets conditions of inequality not found elsewhere in our democratic society. Nor is this inequality necessarily a result of unequal human qualities; it comes because one party has behind him the power of the organization and uses it to prevail over the other. This reminds one uncomfortably of the special rights and privileges which once were enjoyed by men for no other reason than membership in a higher estate—as when society was divided into the nobility, the clergy and the third estate.

There is yet another way in which large organizations tend to diminish the freedom of the individual. The founding fathers sought to secure the “unalienable rights” of man by associating the citizen with the business of governing; that is, by making the consent of the people indispensable to the functioning of government. In order to exercise his public functions a citizen must be free to make up his own mind on any public issue, to speak out and to solicit the approval of his fellow citizens; in other words, to be active politically.

Freedom in private life is important, for the citizen needs what Socrates called “a private station” when he engages in public activities. More than invasions of privacy, intolerable in a free society, are therefore involved when organizations presume to meddle in their employees’ personal lives. Can a man who must submit to organizational regimentation be a fully effective democratic citizen? Will he feel free to engage in active politics if there is doubt in his mind whether the organization he works for, or the union or association to which he belongs, approves?

Many people have been concerned over the danger of our becoming a state dominated by pressure groups. It has been proposed that the people be given a special department to look after their interests. This misreads the problem. The Government in all its branches is already set up specifically to look after the people’s interests and for no other reason. What we must do, I submit, is find ways to curb the illegitimate powers of large organizations, both public and private. Government bureaucracies should be made more responsive to the wishes of the voters; this means bringing them under closer control of our elective bodies. Nongovernmental organizations—labor unions, professional associations, special-interest groups, even business corporations—ought to be held more strictly to the specific mandate of their charters, as well as to “public policy.”

We have allowed the freedom of the individual to shrink while permitting the freedom of the organization to expand to a point where it overshadows human liberties. But this nation was founded for people, not for organizations. We need to remind ourselves that organizations—like technology—are not ends in themselves but means to an end. This end is a good society—a strong nation—human beings who in equal measure are assured the right to “life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.”

I have no simple solutions to offer. There are no simple solutions for any of the problems which urgently require our attention today. We can approach these problems from many different angles. I approach them from the point of view that individual freedom must be preserved.

Fortunately, there are now signs that give one hope we have passed the nadir and are slowly ascending toward the more rugged individualism that was so marked a characteristic of earlier Americans. The shock that Sputnik administered to our self-esteem has led us to throw ourselves into an earnest search for flaws in our way of life. I am convinced that once the American people have been shown at what points individual freedom has been weakened they will speedily reinforce these points.

We will be able to do this all the better if we can overcome a general tendency to think of ourselves as unique. A good deal of not-wholly-disinterested propaganda comes our way seeking to convince us that all the good things of the life we associate with American democracy are uniquely ours. There was a time when life in this country differed greatly from life in other Western nations. For more than 100 years we were the model of the free society. But ideas have been moving back and forth across the Atlantic, leaving deposits on both shores. Democracy as a form of government has long since become the Western—not solely the American—way of life. It is well also to remember that its roots go back 2,500 years to Greece and that in evolving the concept of the equal worth of all men every Western nation has played a part.

The greatest glory of Western civilization is that it alone, on its own, came to accept the idea that man as man, individual man, regardless of his particular attributes or possessions, is “the measure of all things” (Protagoras). Since the political corollary of this idea is democratic government, it is not surprising that democracy, too, is a uniquely Western invention.

There is, to be sure, a so-called “Eastern” concept of democracy: pure Marxist double-talk, of course. It defines democracy as government of the people, on behalf of the people, and in the interest of the people.

In areas of the world where the individual has never been held in high esteem, where he derives his status and rights from membership in some group—family, tribe, church, etc.—this parody of Lincoln’s famous words is sometimes actually taken as a species of democracy. In a negative way, this illustrates the point I wish to make crystal-clear: Respect for individual freedom, for the autonomous individual, is the foundation of a free society. As soon as you think in terms of “groups,” the foundation begins to erode.

Today the true democracies all face similar problems. All are seeking to solve them through the democratic process, and each can learn something from the others without being untrue to itself. There is, I believe, an irresistible trend toward changing government from the “night watchman” to the “service agency” type. Americans could learn something from the way this transition is being made in the most successful of European democracies. Their reasons have been practical, not ideological. What they have recognized and accepted is that modern life is now so complex, so dependent on careful dovetailing of innumerable human activities, that the individual is in greater need than ever of protection by the law against being harmed by his fellow citizens. There can be no valid objection in principle against making necessary changes. The Declaration of Independence states that “it is the right of the people” to alter the powers of government in such a way “as to them shall seem most likely to effect their safety and happiness.”

A friendly though critical visitor to our country once remarked that “there is nothing wrong with America that Americans cannot set right.” We can, if we will, strengthen the autonomous individual in our free society. In so doing we will make our nation not only stronger but also a better place to live.

THE END