

# LECTURE

DELIVERED SEPTEMBER 12, 2013

No. 1242 | FEBRUARY 13, 2014

## The Prospect for Freedom: Can the U.S. Sustain Its Experiment in Self-Government? *Os Guinness*

### Abstract

*In establishing a free republic, the Founders had to tackle three major tasks. The first task was winning freedom—the objective of the Revolution in 1776. The second task was ordering freedom—the objective of the U.S. Constitution in 1787. The third, and in a sense the most difficult, task was sustaining freedom. Sustaining freedom is the challenge of the decades and centuries, and it should be regarded as a prime task for American citizens today.*

Some years ago, I was in China at one of the major universities and speaking to a forum of Chinese CEOs. After the final banquet, I walked back to the lecture hall with the dean of the business school.

“Let me ask you a question I wouldn’t ask in public,” he said. “What am I missing? We in China are fascinated with the Christian roots of your Western past—for the sake of China’s future—but you in the West are cutting off your roots. What am I missing?”

Needless to say, the dean was not missing anything, for a central feature of the West in the 21st century is that it is a “cut-flower civilization.” We are suffering from a crisis of cultural authority. There has been a widespread neglect and repudiation of the Judeo-Christian and Greco-Roman ideas and ideals that have been foundational for the West.

Nowhere is this debt more apparent than in a discussion of freedom and its decline. From the ringing cry of Moses, “Let my people go!” to the heroic stands of the Greeks at Marathon, Thermopylae,

### KEY POINTS

- Winning freedom is the work of a few years, and ordering freedom only a few years more, but sustaining freedom is the challenge of centuries.
- Every constitution rests on a foundation of traditions, customs, and moral standards; if these are corrupted, not even the best constitution in the world will survive.
- Freedom requires not only the proper structures of freedom, such as constitutions and laws, but the spirit of freedom.
- As the institutions that transmit American principles break down, it is now relatively easy to become an American but increasingly difficult to know what it is to be an American.
- We face a simple but very challenging paradox: Sustainable freedom requires self-restraint, which is precisely what freedom undermines when it flourishes.

This paper, in its entirety, can be found at <http://report.heritage.org/hl1242>

The Russell Kirk Memorial Lectures

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and Salamis, to the assassins of Julius Caesar shouting “Libertas! Libertas!” as they ran into the Forum with their daggers still dripping with blood, to the Magna Carta, to the English Bill of Rights in 1689, to the American Bill of Rights and the French Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen—published within five days of each other in 1791—to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948, freedom has been a powerful, central, and recurring theme in the history of the West, even if freedom has often had to be won from evils and oppressions that were Western themselves.

In one of his last writings, Alexis de Tocqueville remarked that “[h]uman societies, like human individuals, are nothing if not by their use of freedom.” And, of course, no country has aspired to this ideal and shouldered this responsibility more openly than the self-proclaimed “land of the free.”

As a European admirer of the noble audacity of the American experiment, I would argue, as I am sure many of you would too, that one of America’s greatest contributions to the history of human freedom is the brilliant and daring attempt by the Founders to build a free republic that they believed could remain free for all time. “Always free, free always,” as it was once expressed.

One simple measure of the scale of America’s challenge today can be seen in an irony that is evident to any visitor to this country. There is no more fashionable word and ideal than “sustainability.” Almost hourly we are urged to have “sustainable growth,” “sustainable developments,” “sustainable environments,” and the like. But not once in my 30 years in Washington, D.C., have I heard anyone, let alone a national leader, talk of sustainable freedom—and certainly not with the wisdom and realism that was so characteristic of the Founders or the young Abraham Lincoln. Yet two-and-a-third centuries after the establishing of freedom in 1776, sustainability is the issue of the hour for freedom.

### **The Tasks of Freedom**

Let me remind you of the three major tasks the Founders were tackling in establishing a free republic. In a way, these tasks are all too obvious, but they are worth repeating because, obvious though they are, most Americans have forgotten the third one, which also happens to be the most crucial one for our day.

The first task was *winning freedom*—the objective of the Revolution in 1776. Naturally, achieving

this was the most glorious of the tasks, and it is well celebrated still, but we must remember that it was not unique. The French won freedom in 1789, the Russians in 1917, and the Chinese in 1949. There have been many revolutions in history in which the oppressive rule of some *ancien régime* has been thrown off successfully.

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The second task was *ordering freedom*—the objective of the U.S. Constitution in 1787. And here, the French did not do it, and the Russians and the Chinese did not do it either. In fact, their revolutions spiraled down to a demonic disorder that most people would say was even worse than the tyrannies they replaced. But the genius of the American revolutionaries was that they not only won freedom, but they ordered it. In the Constitution, they gave freedom the political framework in which it could thrive and, they hoped, endure.

The third task was *sustaining freedom*. Many people can quote Benjamin Franklin’s words as he came out of the constitutional convention in Philadelphia. Asked by a certain Mrs. Powell what the delegates had achieved, he answered famously, “A republic, Madame—if you can keep it!”

As such, the Founders gave considerable thought to what they called the “perpetuation” of the new institutions, and that was the title the 28-year-old Abraham Lincoln chose for his talk when he was asked to address the Young Men’s Lyceum in Springfield, Illinois. But if winning freedom is the work of a few years and ordering freedom only the work of a few years more, then sustaining freedom is the challenge of the decades and centuries, and it should certainly be regarded as a prime task for American citizens today.

### **The Menaces to Freedom**

The Founders’ realism over sustaining freedom included a deep awareness of why freedom was so

difficult to sustain. We rightly consider the Founders revolutionary, but we often forget that they were also rooted in tradition. They knew the classics well and had ransacked them in a daring attempt to use history to defy history. In other words, they tried to learn the lessons of history to try to guard against the reasons why free societies never lasted. Above all, they were aware of such writers as the Greek general and historian Polybius and the Roman orator and statesman Cicero, who had each analyzed the different reasons why the wheel of history kept turning and no form of government lasted forever.

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### In his Lyceum Address, Lincoln added up the “accounts running” 50 years after the Revolution and warned of the “silent artillery of time” damaging the walls of the republic in a way that no foreign invader could do.

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The first challenge highlighted by the ancients was the danger of *external menaces*, but this was the Founders’ least concern for obvious reasons. Most of them came from a small protected island. They found themselves on a large protected continent, with the world’s two largest oceans as their buffer and the nearest serious enemy 3,000 miles away.

Read George Washington’s Farewell Address and Lincoln’s Lyceum Address, and they almost disdain what Lincoln calls the threat of some “transatlantic Bonaparte” putting his foot down in the cornfields of Ohio. Needless to say, we can no longer afford such blithe assurance in a day of intercontinental ballistic missiles and terrorists with box cutters.

The second classical menace came from what Polybius called a *corruption of customs*. What was decisive for any nation, he argued, was its constitution. But—and Americans often ignore his qualification because of justifiable pride in their Constitution—every constitution rests on a bedding of traditions, customs, and moral standards, and if these are corrupted, the best constitution in the world will not hold things together. Such a corruption, Polybius notes, most often happens in periods of power and prosperity.

The third classical menace is in one word: *time*, or as Christians would say, the passing of time and the

presence of sin. It is striking that the U.S. Constitution came into force the same year that Edward Gibbon published the final volume of his classic *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*. In the last chapter, he raised the question, why did Rome fall? And his first answer was “the injuries of time.”

Do your own experiment. Go up to Capitol Hill in Washington, D.C. Look at the rich wealth of the quotations, the statues, and the symbols that speak of American freedom, and you come away with an overwhelming sense of power and permanence. There is nothing to suggest that American power will not last for 10,000 years. Then survey Rome in the same way from the Palatine Hill, and at once you gain a very different impression. In one sweeping gaze, you see the vestiges of the Rome of the kings, the ruins of republican Rome, and the stark marble bones of the majestic and mighty Rome of the Caesars. “This too shall pass” is unarguable.

Such a history-born realism was second nature to the Founders of the American republic and to the young Lincoln years before he entered the White House as the 16th President. In his Lyceum Address, he added up the “accounts running” 50 years after the Revolution and warned of the “silent artillery of time” damaging the walls of the republic in a way that no foreign invader could do.

Again, not in all my years here have I heard a State of the Union Address tackle this theme or similar realism from contemporary American leaders—with the distinguished exception of John Gardner in his many writings on the importance of renewal. The general silence speaks volumes about the appalling disregard of contemporary American leaders for the importance of history and their lack of understanding of their own political system.

### The Paradox of Freedom

Here let me break into the Founders’ discussion by turning to the modern understanding of the paradox of freedom. From the vantage point of global history, we face a simple but very challenging paradox: *Freedom’s greatest enemy is freedom*. There are common ways in which freedom undermines itself—when freedom becomes permissiveness and then license; when those who love freedom put such an emphasis on safety and security that they destroy freedom (“One nation under surveillance”); and when those who prize freedom do anything to defend it—even using methods that contradict and destroy freedom.

One level of the paradox comes from history. If you compress the history of a hundred centuries of civilization into one hour, freedom-loving societies only come in the past few minutes, and they are rare and fleeting.

A deeper level of the paradox is political. As the great French political philosopher Montesquieu pointed out, freedom requires not only the proper *structures* of freedom, such as constitutions and laws, but the *spirit* of freedom. The former, of course, can be laid down once and for all, but the latter must be cultivated from generation to generation. In short, it has to be sustained with care.

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The deepest level of the paradox is ethical. Freedom requires a framework and therefore some restraint, but the only restraint appropriate for freedom is self-restraint. Yet self-restraint is precisely what freedom undermines when it flourishes, so once again freedom becomes its own worst enemy.

### Antidotes to Decline

How did the Founders hope to resist these challenges and build a society that could become free and stay free? They gave no name to their vision. Tocqueville pointed to the importance of the “habits of the heart” in sustaining freedom, and my own name for the Founders’ remedy is “the golden triangle of freedom.” For all the very real differences between the Founders, whether in personalities or policies, they almost all agreed on the three legs of the golden triangle: *freedom requires virtue*, *virtue requires faith of some sort*, and *faith of any sort requires freedom*.

It hardly needs to be said that all three legs of this triangle are routinely neglected or openly assaulted today. Take the first leg: Today, the notion of virtue has a prim reputation, whereas virtue for the Founders was connected to the notion of courage and included a range of such characteristics as integrity, honesty, loyalty, and, of course, character.

The contrast with today is striking. During the impeachment of President Clinton, a number of scholars wrote to *The New York Times* arguing that what a modern President needs is competence and not character.

For the Founders however, character was essential. For one thing, it is the bridge between leaders and followers, so that followers can trust leaders even when they do not know what the leaders are doing or why. For another, character is the inner bearing leaders have, which guides and restrains them when their power is so great that there is little else other than character to provide restraint.

### Freedom Under Assault

Many modern Americans are quite illiterate about their Founders and the nature of the republic they established. Sometimes this indifference is due to mediocre education and to generations of neglecting such issues. At other times, especially in parts of the academic world, there is an open assault on the Founders’ understanding.

But whether the problem is neglect or rejection, the situation raises a question for all who are guilty of such attitudes: Free to dismiss the Founders’ solution to the challenge of sustaining freedom, do they have a suggested alternative to put in its place? In my experience—and I have had the privilege of visiting almost all the 50 states and speaking to a wide range of people in many spheres of life—most Americans have given no thought at all to the question. Such ignorance at such a time is folly.

There is no question that the Founders had their blind spots, but when it came to freedom and to religious freedom, there is also no question that they got things almost nearly right from the very beginning. It would therefore again be foolish to throw out their ideas—baby, bathwater, and all—when many of their ideas are among the most brilliant and daring in all of human history.

There are three main areas in which sustainable freedom is being menaced in contemporary America.

*First*, as emphasized already, there is the marked alienation of many leaders in America. It is always true that the strength and endurance of any nation is called into question if a significant number of its leaders are at odds with the ideas that have made that nation great.

Quite simply, that is the condition in which America finds itself today. On one side, many

progressives dismiss the Founders, in effect, by making a sharp break between the 18th century republic and the modern state of the 21st century. On the other side, many post-modern thinkers debunk the Founders openly, turning their ideals into the hollow rhetoric of the power-driven agendas of the rich and powerful. Either way, the Founders and their solutions are ignored and discarded.

*Second*, there has been a breakdown in the transmission of American principles and ideals. By its very nature, the United States has to be in the business of passing on its principles and ideals in two ways in every generation—from the older generation to the younger (public education) and from the older citizens to the new citizens (immigration). Both of these points of transmission have broken down, especially through a failure of civic education. The result is that the older American motto, *E pluribus unum*, is becoming impossible. There is no sure sense of *unum* to balance the clear exploding *pluribus*.

It is ironic that from the end of World War I right down to the mid-1960s, there were tight quotas for immigration as well as a strong insistence on civic education—whereas the 1960s relaxed both the quotas and the insistence on civic education. It is now relatively easy to *become* an American but increasingly difficult to know what it is to *be* an American.

*Third*, there has been a marked “corruption of customs,” to use Polybius’s term. It might well be argued that many of the issues fought over in the culture wars are examples of the corruption of American customs, for few of them would have divided Americans in previous generations. For example, it is obvious that contemporary American concerns for freedom represent an understanding of freedom that the Founders, who distinguished liberty from license, would never have recognized.

### Contemporary Confusions

When my book *A Free People’s Suicide* was published a year ago, my wife and I were invited to Capitol Hill to speak to a Congressman who has been a veteran of Capitol Hill affairs for 30 years. He greeted us warmly at the door and said, “I really like your book, but I have one disagreement: It’s too optimistic!”

With the word *suicide* in the title and cogent arguments for America’s dire crisis, that has not been a common criticism, but it would be easy to reinforce the urgency of the argument even further. Why, for example, do so many Americans not seem

to care about the state of freedom at all? One reason is the strength of the confusions that surround the issue today.

One leading confusion grows from the uncritical equation of freedom and democracy, as if the two terms were synonymous. This mistake was prevalent, for instance, in the White House of George W. Bush and came to its climax in his ardent advocacy of the invasion of Iraq.

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Anyone who knows the history and philosophy of democracy is advised to be more cautious, for democracy has not always been the friend of freedom. From Plato and Socrates onward, there have been recurring warnings about the nature of democracy and its eventual links to tyranny, and those voices have included many of the leading champions of the liberal concern for personal freedom, such as John Adams, Alexander Hamilton, Tocqueville, Lord Acton, Lord Macaulay, and John Stuart Mill.

Democracies are often highly illiberal, monarchies are sometimes far more liberal, almost every dictatorship in the modern world has justified itself as democratic, and dictatorships from Hitler’s Germany to Morsi’s Egypt were voted in democratically. It is a simple fact that modern democratic governments have powers over their citizens—and the power to restrict their citizens’ freedom—which would have been the envy of the great despots of history, such as Louis XIV. Edmund Burke’s realism about the French Revolution should have warned us about over-enthusiastic perceptions of the “Arab Spring”—and of the folly of thinking that four-yearly visits to ballot boxes will be enough to comprise democracy. Government of the people, by the people, for the people is not as straightforward as many think, for democracy is not always conducive to freedom.

Another major confusion comes from the simplistic equation of liberty and equality. The truth is that the two ideals are often in competition and sometimes in open conflict. There is no question that the American Revolution favored liberty and the French Revolution favored equality and that it was the stress on equality that helped the French Revolution to degenerate into tyranny.

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## Presidential elections are now popularity contests, opinion polls and blog-battles have replaced reasoned debate, and the wisdom of the self-governed is what the public “likes” it to be.

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For anyone who thinks about it, the problems with equality are plain. For a start, with the exception of moral and political equality—the equality proclaimed in the Declaration of Independence—humans are simply not equal in strength, speed, or intelligence, so equality is always artificial and coerced. Then, too, the leveling that is necessary to create equality appeals to envy and resentment and soon becomes a Procrustean politics that is draconian. And all the time there has to be an umpire to adjudicate between inequalities, so the provider state grows with centralized power and confines freedom further.

Such equality-based non-discrimination soon becomes a slide toward coercive uniformity and drastic betrayal of personal freedom. Liberals who now call themselves “progressives” do not notice how they have become illiberal, but the shift from their old concern for personal freedom to their new passion for progressive equality is a major milestone in the decline of Western freedom.

A third major confusion grows from the corruption of wisdom in the age of social media. If it is difficult to sustain lasting freedom, it is also difficult to build a large republic or a mass democracy. Clearly, such a large democracy must be representative and indirect rather than direct. Clearly, too, a large democracy requires that universal suffrage be followed by universal education, as many 19th century Presidents asserted.

But as the critics pointed out, universal education was likely to lead to debased education, and

today, in the age of social media, with the explosion of information and the acceleration of events, wisdom has collapsed into information and then into raw, undiluted emotion. Presidential elections are now popularity contests, opinion polls and blog-battles have replaced reasoned debate, and the wisdom of the self-governed is what the public “likes” it to be. Clearly, the slipway has been greased for some new descent into tyranny, even in the land of the free.

## What Can Be Done?

I am sure you have all seen Thomas Coles’ five great paintings, “The Course of Empire.” I was once asked to give a talk on the state of the Union in front of these early 19th century masterpieces, and the chairman introduced the evening by saying, “As I fear, and as I think many of you will agree, today we are probably somewhere between the third and fourth painting—between ‘Consummation’ and ‘Destruction.’”

Only God knows exactly where we are, and I will not hazard a guess. It’s easier to suggest what needs to be done to remedy the situation. Put simply, we must face up to three things.

*First*, we must reassess the nature of freedom. Freedom may be defined simply as the capacity to exercise our self-determination. In other words, it is not a goal in itself, but a means. But that only invites further questions: Means toward what end? Is freedom purely external, or must it begin with internal freedom? Is freedom merely negative, or is it positive too? If freedom is not the permission to do what we like but the power to do what we ought, what does that mean for the broad varieties of today’s libertarianism that are quite simply unsustainable?

*Second*, we must restore the place of civic education. It was once a commonplace notion that in a free society, everyone is born free, but not everyone is capable of freedom. Citizens must be educated for liberty, the place of liberal or civic education. Yet since the 1960s, civic education has largely disappeared from public education in America—with fateful consequences for the republic.

*Third*, we must reopen the civil public square, restore civility, and encourage citizens of all faiths and none to enter and engage public life. Fifty years of culture warring have had the effect of polarizing public life, reducing public debate to endless litigation, and squandering the American heritage that was once the most nearly perfect solution the world has seen. After years of endless scholarly analysis,

the time has come for solutions, yet no national leader seems capable or willing to address the issues in the interests of all Americans.

Let me finish with a quotation from the great Alexis de Tocqueville. *Democracy in America* is understandably loved by Americans, but it was, of course, written primarily for his fellow Frenchmen. A great admirer of the American Revolution and its stand for liberty, he was a disappointed lover of the French Revolution. Toward the end of his life, after countless comparisons between the two revolutions, he made this remark: “In a revolution, as in a novel, the hard part to invent is the ending.”

The American Founders wrote a brilliant first chapter of the American story, and many stirring

chapters have been written since then. There is no question, however, that this generation’s chapter will be one of the most crucial of all. Is freedom sustainable as the Founders believed? Always free, will Americans be able to remain free always? This generation holds in its hands the response that will decide that question.

—*Os Guinness is an author and social critic who has written or edited more than 30 books, including A Free People’s Suicide: Sustainable Freedom and the American Future and his latest, The Global Public Square: Religious Freedom and the Making of a World Safe for Diversity.*