

America's Proud Legacy of Liberty

COMMENTARY

By [Peter Berkowitz](#) - RCP Contributor
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As the second decade of the 21st century draws to a close, the American experiment in free and democratic self-government confronts two decisive challenges. One stems from an illiberal and anti-democratic great power abroad. The other arises from an obdurate attack on America's commitment to freedom and democracy at home. Despite disparate sources, they are interconnected: To meet the challenge from without, the United States must prevail over the challenge from within.

The China challenge is daunting. That's not because the world's most populous country has taken its place among the great powers of the world, but rather owing to China's peculiar conception of the world and its rightful place in global affairs. China seeks to revise the established international order — which favors sovereign nation-states committed to protecting human rights and fundamental freedoms — to suit the authoritarianism of its communist form of government and the expansionist and hegemonic aspirations of its interpretation of Chinese nationalism.

Meanwhile, the educational challenge at home is formidable. That's not because K-12 teachers and college professors raise questions about America's founding principles, but rather as a result of their determination to prohibit questions about their wholesale indictment of the United States for perpetrating myriad forms of oppression. Launched to great fanfare a few months ago in the New York Times Magazine, [The 1619 Project](#) is only the latest and most extravagant expression of this campaign. The project's central allegation — [contrary to the facts and the scholarship](#) — is that slavery has been the essential feature of and remains hardwired in American politics. And its larger aim is to reorient the American school curriculum to focus on the pervasive and enduring racism that, it contends, was originally inscribed in the nation's institutions and spirit at America's true founding — in 1619, when slaves were first delivered to the English colonies.

This transformation of education into propaganda fosters contempt for the nation. Students raised on relentless exaggerations of the nation's deviations from its professed ideals — while glossing over the ideals themselves and the many instances in which the United States, in honoring them, has provided a model to the world — will be less willing to embrace the demanding policies necessary to preserve an international order that fosters free and sovereign nations. Consequently, reform of the American educational system — so that it transmits, rather than suppresses, knowledge of the principles of freedom — is an essential feature of sound American foreign policy.

Reformers can draw inspiration from Richard Brookhiser's "Give Me Liberty: A History of America's Exceptional Idea." A veteran senior editor at National Review and author of 13 previous books, Brookhiser concisely and compellingly relates the stories of "thirteen

documents, from 1619 to 1987, that represent snapshots from the album of our long marriage to liberty.”

He rejects the view — once a staple of the left and recently embraced on the right — that classical liberalism, which holds that government’s purpose is to protect individual freedom, is inherently incompatible with nationalism, which champions government’s promotion of a particular people’s traditions and political aspirations. Certainly, national traditions can be chauvinistic and authoritarian, rooted in subjugation of the individual to the collective good, and bound up with conquest of other peoples. But the United States, notwithstanding the blemishes and flaws it shares with all countries, is different.

“The unique feature of America’s nationalism is its concern for liberty,” writes Brookhiser. “We have been securing it, defining it, recovering it, and fighting for it for four hundred years. We have been doing it since we were a floundering settlement on a New World river, long before we were a country. We do it now on podiums and battlefields beyond our borders.”

Even the year 1619 testifies to liberty’s deep roots in America. True, it was then that the first slaves arrived. But slavery was an Old World import. In the same year, the minutes of the Jamestown General Assembly marked an advance in self-government: The freemen of the British colony established in the New World the first legislature by electing representatives, each of whose votes was counted as equal.

Religious liberty and free speech gained strength in pre-revolutionary America. The 1657 Flushing Remonstrance rebuked Peter Stuyvesant, director-general of New Amsterdam (the Dutch colony headquartered on what would become Manhattan), for intolerance of Quakers. Signed by 26 town residents, none of whom were Quaker, the Remonstrance argued that religious freedom was a biblical imperative. In the 1735 trial of New York newspaper publisher John Peter Zenger for seditious libel, which resulted in a verdict of not guilty, defense lawyer Andrew Hamilton stirringly rejected the idea that speaking the truth about government, however critical, was punishable by law.

America’s founding documents, Brookhiser emphasizes, put freedom at the center. In 1776, the Declaration of Independence proclaimed that legitimate government is grounded in the consent of the governed and has as its proper purpose the protection of unalienable rights, which by definition inhere in all persons. In 1787, the drafters of the Constitution presented for ratification to the people of the 13 states a charter of government carefully crafted to secure those rights. And in 1863 at Gettysburg, President Abraham Lincoln paid tribute to the fallen soldiers who fought to preserve a “nation, conceived in liberty and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal,” while summoning his fellow citizens to rededicate themselves to the equality in freedom in which the nation was born.

Two of the documents to which Brookhiser devotes chapters illustrate citizens’ role in extending freedom. The 1785 constitution of the New-York Manumission Society maintained that slavery had no place in a free society because God gave to all human beings an “equal right to life, liberty, and property.” The 1848 Seneca Falls Declaration of Sentiments rallied support for women’s equality by appealing to the unalienable rights that inspired the nation’s founding.

American views about immigration and the economy also reflect an enduring commitment to freedom. In “The New Colossus,” composed in 1883 and installed on the pedestal of the Statue of Liberty in 1903, Emma Lazarus connects freedom to refuge for the oppressed: “Give me your tired, your poor/ Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free/ The wretched refuse of your teeming shore/ Send them, the homeless, tempest-tost to me/ I lift my lamp beside the golden door.” In his 1896 “Cross of Gold” speech delivered in Chicago at the Democratic National Convention, William Jennings Bryan presented equal treatment for workers as an imperative of freedom.

Freedom also directly informs American foreign policy. In his 1823 message to Congress, President James Monroe placed the Western Hemisphere off limits to further colonization by European monarchies. The Monroe Doctrine, Brookhiser argues, “made America, as far as we were able, the advocate of liberty in the world.” In a 1940 fireside chat, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt announced that the defense of American liberty required the United States to become “the great arsenal of democracy” in support of Britain against the Nazis. And in 1987, before the Brandenburg Gate and in the shadow of the Berlin Wall — the grim barrier built by the communist bloc to lock residents in and keep others out — President Ronald Reagan reaffirmed the American conviction that liberty is the right of all humanity: “Mr. Gorbachev,” he exhorted the general secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, “tear down this wall.”

Americans are the inheritors of a proud legacy of liberty. To meet the challenges to freedom at home and abroad, we must make a priority of reclaiming that legacy.

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