

SEEDS OF DESTRUCTION

IF WE are ever to learn from history we must recognize that understanding history demands that facts be placed in their proper context. History is neither an aggregation of a series of events nor merely a description of actions taken by individuals or groups; rather, history is a continuum of how people behave within their socio-political and natural environments.

The earliest hunter-gatherer societies were universally cooperative in structure. Technology improved their ability to hunt large game animals, and an increased food supply yielded larger populations which, in turn, decimated the food supply followed by the break-up and migration of tribes into smaller groups.

When, some 8-10,000 years ago various groups discovered the secrets of horticulture and settled into fixed communities, hunters became warriors and then chieftains; this elite group eventually came to practice systematic extortion on their own people as well as any outside groups they could dominate by force.

When history is viewed as a continuum, a considerable degree of relevance comes through in any discussion about recent events and those of antiquity. All agrarian-based societies came to be ruled by hierarchies of non-producers who relied on coercion to sanction and entrench their positions of privilege.

Some societies achieved *critical mass* sooner than others (often aided by even only minor advantages in technology or strategy), resulting in the rise of their dominance over others.

The French historian Ferdinand Lott (even more than Gibbon) leaves no doubt by the example of Rome that all empires contain the seeds of their own eventual destruction. Romans during the empire period produced almost no wealth; what they gained they gained by conquest or extortion. Eventually, the more cooperative tribal societies hastened its decline, then fought with one another for the next 1,000 years for control of Eurasian territory.

THESE tribal wars have never really ended. For sometimes brief or relatively longer periods certain tribes allied with one another and achieved a degree of hegemony over others.

The Moslems, Byzantines and Franks filled the gaps left when the western empire dissolved. What we think of as modern Western civilization began when Spanish power consolidated into a strong monarchy and pushed the Moslems from the Iberian peninsula.

The centralization of power was next achieved in France; however, what had the most profound influence on both the indigenous people and immigrants to North America was the inability of the monarchy to consolidate its power in Britain.

The socio-political arrangements that arose in Bri-

It's time to re-examine the myths that are passed off as history, writes
EDWARD J. DODSON

tain were more effectively balanced between the landed and commercial interests than in either Spain or France. This is not to say that Britain was not dominated by a privileged aristocracy. As bad as things were in Britain, they were much worse in Spain and France. Moreover, British colonial policy was driven by commercial interests; large land grants brought profits to their recipients only when enough colonists had arrived to bid against one another for farmland or business sites and quasi-monopolistic trading licenses.

Britain established settlements and new markets for its manufactured goods; the French and Spanish chose to exploit furs and precious metals because their productive capacity to produce manufactured goods was severely underdeveloped and discouraged by gross maldistributions of wealth and crushing taxation of producers at home.

For nearly 150 years the colonists in North America functioned without any real central government. They experienced self-government and the nearly universal ownership of landed and other property. Thus, when Britain finally got around to challenging this arrangement of salutary neglect, the conflict that followed was conservative in the sense that Americans were trying to protect the individual liberties they in practice enjoyed.

In France, the people were revolting against the despotism of the monarchy but had no practical experience at participatory government or widespread ownership of property to guide them in forming a new highly decentralized system of government. As history shows, the greater the centralization the greater the probability of government by tyranny. The French and Spanish were only the first societies formed in the modern era to experience the crushing weight of centralized power.

IN NORTH America, the final break with Britain set the stage for a tragic and ongoing drift toward centralized authority and the loss of individual liberty. Adoption of the Federal Constitution forged a national government at the expense of a Confederation of sovereign states. The power to raise a national army made it very much easier for the Americans of European descent to acquire new lands at the expense of the indigenous tribes, lands promised by the nation's political leaders as payment of the government's war debt.

Thus, national government shifted the burden of

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'FRONTIER' REALITIES

Frederick Jackson Turner continues to receive the credit for developing "the frontier thesis" - namely, that the availability of land was what Bob Clancy summarised as "the cutting edge of American civilization and determined its democracy, its individualism, its culture."¹

In fact, the elements of that thesis were laid out by Henry George 10 years before the young historian presented his address to the American Historical Society in 1893.

In 1883, George wrote *Social Problems*². In this, he spotlighted issues which were not only of relevance in his day, but which would repay study today for the insights they offer into modern social problems.

As a journalist who had roamed the western frontier in search of stories, George acquired a deep appreciation of the interaction between man, his culture and the natural environment. He was to distill some of those insights in *Social Problems*, including this proposition:

"All that we are proud of in national life and national character comes primarily from our background of unused land."

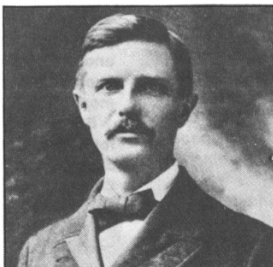
It was, he said, "the virtue of new soil, the freedom of opportunity given by the possibility of expansion, that has here transmuted into wholesome human growth material that, had it remained in Europe, might have been degraded and dangerous..."

Turner is credited with chronicl-

By IAN BARRON

ing the closing of the frontier. Yet George, in 1893, was already sending out the signals that the frontier was about to be closed: "There is no farther West. Our advance has reached the Pacific, and beyond the Pacific is the East, with its teeming millions."

But it was the genius of George that he was not deceived by



• Frederick Jackson Turner

appearances. He pointed out that this "closure" was nothing more than legal formality: it did not mean that there was no more land for others to occupy.

All that it meant was that the last tracts were about to be fenced off, with the speculators even then moving north-westward into Canada and southward to Mexico, to seek out the soil on which others would later need to live. He drew the parallels with Europe:

"The social pressure which forces on our shores this swelling tide

of immigration arises not from the fact that land of Europe is all in use, but that it is all appropriated. That will soon be our case as well. Our land will not all be used; but it will all be 'fenced in'".

George understood the social significance of that closure: "And, correlatively, one of the most momentous events that could happen to the modern world would be the ending of this possibility of westward expansion".

He concluded his analysis with this statement: "What I want to point out is that we are very soon to lose one of the most important conditions under which our civilization has been developing - that possibility of expansion over virgin soil that has given scope and freedom to American life ...".

This, then, was the framework waiting for embellishment. And along came Mr Turner, 22 when George's thesis was published.

Ten years later, the two men were present at the Columbian Exposition in Chicago. Turner delivered his address entitled "The Significance of the Frontier in American History". George was attending one of the first conferences on the Single Tax.

Turner received the credit for this thesis: but Henry George had planted the intellectual seeds.

¹"How to Make an Endless Frontier", *Land and Liberty*, July-Aug, 1990, p.62.

²*Social Problems* (1883); New York; Robert Schakenbach Foundation, 1981, Ch.3.

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paying for independence from Britain to the vanquished. In the process, the concept of voluntary association was thereafter destroyed; force, rather than the inherent justice of positive law, would become the means of holding the United States together.

What is so troubling to me is that not only have we ignored the true lessons of history, most of what is taught in our public schools that passes for history is either half-truth or myth. For example, very few of the framers of the U.S. constitution believed in democracy or widespread participatory government; they were elitist and conservative, anxious to preserve and expand the privilege they had for so long enjoyed. When the North American frontier was set-

led a century later, the true extent of these privileges brought misery and poverty to millions of immigrants - often worse than what they had left in Europe or Asia or Africa.

The social democracies have engaged in 45 years of centralized intervention. This has had a socialistic flavour in many of the European states; in the United States and Canada the experiment is thought of as Liberalism. Decades of massive government spending and heavy taxation of those who produce the wealth in these societies have only pulled us closer than ever before to becoming societies of haves and have nots - despite an increase in productive capabilities that could provide a level of material well-being undreamed of two generations ago.

We have no one but ourselves to blame.