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COMMENT

There are really two major Bicentennials this year. The one receiving the most widespread attention is of course the 200th anniversary of the USA. The other, a bit quieter and more specialized, marks the publication of The Wealth of Nations by Adam Smith in 1776. Both are of exceptional interest to Georgists.

The USA Bicentennial celebrates especially the American Declaration of Independence which contains a compact statement by Jefferson on the rights of man, universal in nature and derived from the best thinking of many nations: "We hold these truths to be self-evident: That all men are created equal; that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights; that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness."

The leaders of the new Republic endeavored to carry out this concept in its Constitution and laws, and great progress was made, however imperfect, toward establishing political equality and civil liberties.

Less satisfactory was the attention paid to the economic fulfillment of those principles, as pointed out by Henry George a century later. He harked back to Jeffersonian ideals and said the Republic will only be fully established when equal rights to land are accorded to all men.

Adam Smith's classic, The Wealth of Nations, was also a foundation recognized by George. Smith - who has been called "the father of political economy" - set forth in embryonic form concepts which were pursued by later economists and brought to their logical conclusion by Henry George. Smith showed that the real wealth of nations was the goods their people produced, not merely precious metals, and that the best results may be obtained by allowing people to freely produce and exchange wealth, internationally as well as nationally. Smith also saw the special nature of land, and although he did not pursue the idea very far, said that the landowner collects rent as an unearned income and that a tax on land is not a tax on production. It remained for George to point out the full significance of this.

So we Georgists can in a special sense claim to be inheritors of the "spirit of '76" - of Smith and Jefferson. We can show the way forward to realize these ideals. Economists - many of whom have rejected Smith - are floundering in a morass and do not know the way out. Politicians may spout the Declaration of Independence but can think of nothing better to do than increase government regulations, taxing and spending, thus further strangling the freedom of individuals.

By contrast, measure the simple Georgist proposal against the principles of Jefferson and Smith: Abolish all taxation save that upon land values. Secure to all equal right of access to land and allow each one to keep the fruits of his toil. Yes, we are closer to the Spirit of '76, but we'd feel better about it if we were closer to its realization.

R.C.

The Georgist Journal, Rm. 462-A, 55 W. 42nd St., New York, N.Y. 10036, USA.
Robert Clancy, Editor. Readers are invited to submit suitable articles, letters, news, etc. for publication.