



St. Stephen's Traditional Episcopal Church

11856 Mays Chapel Road
Timonium, Maryland 21093
Telephone: (410) 560-6776

A MEDITATION ON INDEPENDENCE DAY July 4th, 2011

When the United States was founded as a republic, governed upon democratic principles, Austria, and most German states, were members of the Holy Roman Empire; Russia was ruled by an empress, a/k/a the Autocrat of All the Russias; France was ruled by an absolute monarch; the Middle East was largely under despotic sway of the Sultan of Turkey, ruler of the Ottoman Empire; the Indian subcontinent was governed by the British East India Company; an emperor ruled China and Japan bowed to the will of a dictator called the Shogun.

Today, all but one of those great powers have been swept away -- consigned to what some politician or the other once called the trash can of history. The only one that is still in existence today was, back then, by far the least significant -- a loose federation of 13 puny, impoverished states strung along the coastline of a vast land mass at the very edge of the known world.

Today the United States is far from puny. It is the most powerful nation in the world -- more powerful than the Kingdom of France ever was, more powerful than China, more powerful than Japan; more powerful than even the Autocrat of All the Russias ever dreamed of being. It is rich, too -- far more so than fabulously wealthy Sultan of Turkey; far richer than the Holy Roman Empire.

Speculation as to why things should have turned out this way has, for much of this century, provided rich fodder for politicians, historians, economists, sociologists, psychologists, media hacks and bar room philosophers. Unsurprisingly, perhaps, a wide diversity of explanations for the phenomenon are on offer.

Some explanations cite the nature of the political structures of those now-vanished empires. It has been argued that monarchical and imperial systems of government are inherently unstable and, thus, the collapse of the empires was quite inevitable. It has been claimed the monarchies and empires were far too diverse ethnically speaking and, thus, susceptible to the nationalist aspirations of the subject peoples.

Other explanations hang on economic theory: America, it is claimed, enshrined in its constitution the fundamental right of its citizens own and enjoy their private property; it fostered a vigorous and entrepreneurial capitalism -- and this is what affords the Americans form of government its remarkable longevity.

None of these explanations withstand scrutiny. Monarchies and empires have been the way of government almost from the beginning of time. By the time our nation was founded the Holy Roman Empire had endured for 1,000 years; the Chinese empire for

millennia longer than that. At its collapse, the Ottoman Empire was more than 300 years older than we are today.

Nor can ethnic diversity be considered destabilizing. The Roman Empire, a model of stability, in its day embraced the whole world. And the United States was even more ethnically diverse at its founding than the Holy Roman Empire. The racial argument simply doesn't cut the mustard. Nor does the economic argument. All of those long vanished empires fostered and promoted entrepreneurial capitalism.

The clue to the United States' remarkable prosperity is to be found in the Scripture readings appointed for Independence Day. The lesson for the epistle, for instance, is taken from the Book of Deuteronomy, the book in which Moses recapitulates the law God handed down to the Children of Israel during their wanderings in Sinai.

On the surface of things, it probably seems a trifle peculiar for the Church to have appointed a lesson from one of the most ancient books of The Bible to celebrate the declaration of the independence what is still -- in terms of its political system and economic philosophy -- the most modern state in the whole world.

What about the first Amendment -- the "Wall of Separation" between Church and state? Actually, the term "wall of separation" appears nowhere in the Constitution or its amendments. In any event, our ancestors did, indeed, see direct parallels between the governance of the United States and the governance of ancient Israel.

Contrary to modern superstition, a vast majority of this nation's Founding Fathers held deep Christian convictions. There is a very good reason why they chose to found a democratic republic (something that hadn't existed for over 2,000 years) rather than a constitutional monarchy -- a system of government which, for all practical purposes, would have served them equally well. Certainly, they wanted to establish a genuinely democratic government, but, as a consequence of their profound faith, they also wanted to establish a truly "godly" form of government.

The Covenant contained in Deuteronomy is a treaty of suzerainty between a king and a subject people. It is composed according to a legal formula employed in the region 1,500 years before Christ. God is the king and the Children of Israel are the subject people. And, in return, God assured them their nation would be blessed.

The lessons from the Book of Deuteronomy are read on Independence Day are intended to remind us that blessings also entail obligations. We're obliged, for example, to help the poor and down trodden; the fatherless and widowed. We are obliged to welcome the strangers in our land, remembering they have come here for the same reasons our ancestors came: to build a better life for themselves and their children.

Jesus in the Gospel tells us that, as Christians, we must go further than that: We must love our enemies and do good to those who persecute us. This isn't pie in the sky. We know it works. After all, our own fathers put it into practice.

At the end of the Second World War -- for the first time in history -- the victors helped the vanquished to rebuild. Yes, we helped Germany and Japan to rebuild their shattered cities and devastated economies, but we did so by giving them a gift far more precious than gold -- democratic governments modeled on our own.

We have shared our blessings and, in turn, God has blessed us. What the lessons appointed for Independence Day teach us is that as long as we continue to share our blessings we will continue to be blessed. May God bless you all and enable you to be a blessing to others. **GPH✠**